

Sub-project A01

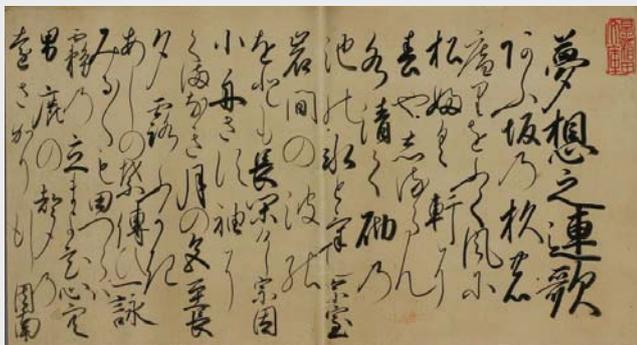
Literary Manuscripts in a Ritual Context: Linked Poetry (*renga*) in Medieval Japan

Prof. Dr. Jörg B. Quenzer

Dr. Heidi Buck-Albulet

Project Summary

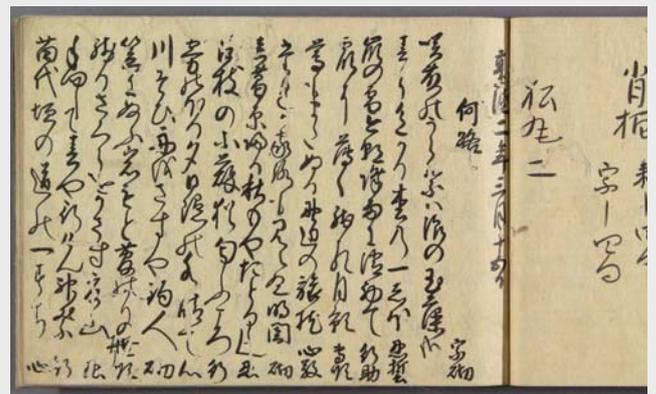
Linked poetry (*renga*) manuscripts have two distinguishing characteristics. In many cases, they were produced on an ad hoc basis during the creation of the poem, the latter being an endeavour normally undertaken by anything between two and seven poets working collaboratively. Secondly, and like the textual level, the production of such manuscripts was determined by a strict set of rules of ritual nature, which stipulated everything in detail, from the paratext of the title to the placing of the various written elements on the page (its visual organisation). The physical production of the manuscript was the task of a professional, who participated in the creation of the poem both in a performative and in an adjudicating capacity. This combination of features – a linking of ritualised performance and literary production – is very rare. Its roots are to be found primarily in two traditions: courtly poetry contests (*utaawase*), a genre that is also characterised by the interaction of several poets; and the religious manuscript culture associated with temples and shrines, in particular, the donation of manuscripts as a religious act (*hōnō*).



Musō no renga (© Waseda Bibliothek)

Aims

The main objective of this project is to determine the connection between a physical manuscript and its rituals of production in order to better understand the ways in which it was used across the religious and secular spheres in medieval Japan. This will allow for an analysis of the special part played by the physical object as it shifted between the roles of a textual carrier and donated object, its entity guaranteed by means of ritual, as our initial thesis holds.



Korenga narabini seishi (© Waseda Bibliothek)

Manuscript Culture in Japan

Japanese culture gradually absorbed the system of writing and its attendant cultural techniques used on the continent. This process of adoption took a long time. The dominant materials from the late 7th until the late 17th centuries were brush, ink and paper. Various combinations of texts and images are also of interest here, in particular, narrative picture scrolls (*emakimono*) and illustrated books (mostly referred to as *nara ehon*). In the mediaeval period, especially, a manuscript served as a medium permitting the relatively fast production of copies of it, while its physical nature also meant that access to the texts could be controlled, particularly in traditions based around esoteric knowledge.

The adoption of woodblock printing in the 11th century made little difference to this situation. Canonical texts may have been printed from then on, but manuscripts continued to be the main means of transcription and dissemination of knowledge and cultural ideas for many cultural genres.

From the 18th century onwards, the consolidation of a wealthy stratum of society in large towns and cities led to the book-printing boom of the modern era, thanks to the more affordable and flexible process of woodblock printing. Nonetheless, many texts continued to be produced by hand in large quantities, manuscripts being both written as original documents and copied as duplicates during this period. It was only with the advent of modernity, as the country opened up in the mid-19th century and swiftly caught up with Western technology, that the roughly 1,200-year history of the manuscript as the main medium of written communication in Japan came to an end.