Panel 13: Myth, Region, and Literature of the Classical Period (October 14: 8:30 a.m. - 10:20 a.m.)

Masako Nakagawa, Villanova University
“Kiritsubo and Yang Kuei-fei: A Sino-Japanese Dimension”
Abstract: Po Chü-i’s famous poem: “The Song of Everlasting Sorrow” spread in Japan during Po’s lifetime and created a literary sensation. Po’s work is about Yang Kuei-fei, a famous Imperial consort. It is no coincidence that Prince Genji’s mother Kiritsubo is compared to Yang Kuei-fei in the first chapter of The Tale of Genji. The story of Genji’s parents, Kiritsubo and the Emperor, has a tragic ending like that of Yang. Through the comparison with Yang, Kiritsubo is defined as a woman with humility and subtlety. After Kiritsubo’s death the Emperor sends a messenger to Kiritsubo’s mother. This is an obvious allusion to Po’s poem. The Emperor’s emissary encounters the mother whose personal grief overpowers and makes her to hint at her criticism toward the Emperor in connection with her daughter’s untimely death while the Chinese magician flies to a magic isle where Yang’s spirit greets him with a full of gratitude toward imperial concerns even after her death. Here Murasaki Shikibu presents a new theme of true human emotion underneath humility and subtlety which the Japanese people had valued. Guided by deep emotion, Kiritsubo’s son Genji falls in love with his stepmother Fujiwara who is said to resemble his late mother. His quest then leads to the discovery of young Murasaki, Fujiwara’s niece. In his romantic adventures true human emotion is a strong primordial force, and if not in check it could ruin his personal life as it did with his parents. This study addresses a hitherto unexplored driving force behind the narrative through an examination of its impact on Genji’s story in relation with Yang’s.

Joshua Frydman, Yale University
“Poetry Transmission Before the Man’yōshū: the Mysteries of the Akihagino Mokkan”
Abstract: In late 2008, a mokkan (an inscribed wooden tablet) bearing a fragment of poetry was discovered at an obscure archeological site north of modern Nara, where it immediately captured media attention across Japan. Dating from the mid-8th century, the mokkan holds eleven characters used purely for their phonetic pronunciation, inscribing a line of Japanese that correlates exactly to the first eleven syllables of a poem in the Man’yōshū, the earliest anthology of Japanese poetry. The object was named the Akihagino Mokkan based on the first five characters of the poem. The Baba Minami Ruins where it was discovered, despite not appearing in any written record, featured structures typical of elite residences, as well as a Buddhist temple compound including two halls and a pagoda. Based on artifacts and construction materials, it appears to have been built by the same craftsmen used for the Heijō Palace itself, and thus was intimately connected to the highest levels of the Nara court. Moreover the discovery of an inscribed waka at a Buddhist ritual center reinforces tantalizing but scant evidence in the Man’yōshū and other Nara Period documents as to the locations of poetry composition and transmission. While the exact nature of the Akihagino Mokkan is still uncertain, reading the tablet and its site against these historical clues allows us a glimpse at the developments that lead to the flourishing of poetry in and around Nara in the 8th century.

Kathryn Hemmann, University of Pennsylvania
“Mythical Landscapes and Imaginary Creatures: Pokémon as a Construction of National Unity through Regionalism”
Abstract: Regionalism is an important component of Japanese national identity, as scholarship such as Marilyn Ivy’s Discourses of the Vanishing and Alisa Freedman’s Tokyo in Transit has demonstrated. In contemporary Japan, an awareness of distinct regional characteristics is created by promotional tourist literature, by local dialects represented in writing, and by popular media expressions of regional differences. This paper will examine Japanese regionalism through a reading of Nintendo’s Pokémon series of video games. Each successive installment in the series has been set in a different fictional region of an archipelago closely resembling Japan. Each of these regions has its own native population of pokémon, as well as its own distinctive cultural character. Furthermore, by exploring the region that serves as the setting for a particular game, the player learns the mythology of that region, which often resembles the myths of the various regional Shintō practices in Japan. The player is thus encouraged to think of the pokémon world as Japan. By virtually touring the regions of Japan through the Pokémon games, the player actively engages in a narrative of regional differentiation and, through an awareness of the overarching connections between these regions, national identity. In this paper, I argue that, in the imagined version of Japan represented by the Pokémon series of video games, the ludic enjoyment of regionalism not only reinforces national identity but may also be applied to a flexible and accommodating understanding of internationalization in contemporary Japan.

Gian-Piero Persiani, University of Oxford
“Place or Placename: Taira no Kanemori’s Poetic Journey to Suruga in 979.”
Abstract: Placenames (utamakura or meisho) are a hugely important element of classical poetry. The fact that they were so often employed as rhetorical devices, especially in the highly-conventionalized poetry of the post-Kokinshū period, belies their significance as physical sites with specific geographical, religious, and political features. How strong was the connection between actual places and their literary insignias? Can Heian waka poems really say anything about the places they mention? The paper approaches these questions by looking at a series of poems by the prominent late-tenth century poet Taira no Kanemori (910?-990). In 979 Kanemori was appointed governor of the north-eastern province of Suruga (present-day Shizuoka). His personal poetry collection contains numerous poems that purport to describe his journey to Suruga and his activities there. But did Kanemori, who was nearly seventy years old at the time of his appointment, ever make the long and perilous journey to the North? Or were his Suruga poems simply signposts of a purely literary geography? The paper juxtaposes the seemingly discrete worlds of poetry composition, career in the provincial bureaucracy, and travel in the ancient world in order to probe the seemingly discrete worlds of poetry composition, career in the provincial bureaucracy, and travel in the ancient world in order to probe the