During the tumultuous mid-nineteenth century, as Japan faced foreign incursions and domestic upheaval, politically-minded youths took action, challenging the authorities, decrying government policies, and occasionally launching violent attacks. Though these young men (and a few women) had a wide range of loyalties and orientations, they shared a political fervor that often found expression in traditional verse forms. Activists used both Sinitic poems, kanshi, and Japanese language waka to declare their intentions, exploiting distinctive features of each form. This talk examines the field of activist poetry in late Tokugawa Japan and its afterlives in the Meiji era and beyond. In particular it considers the circulation of such poetry, the process by which certain activist works became canonized, and how this body of poetry was used for later historiographical ends.

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