Japanese 09H and 10H
Conquering Kanji (I) and (II)
Amherst College

• Course instructor

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• Course Description

Japanese uses three different writing systems, one of which is called Kanji, with characters that were borrowed from China. A linguist, R.A. Miller (1986) in his book Nihongo (Japanese), writes: “The Japanese writing system is, without question, the most complicated and involved system of script employed today by any nation on earth; it is also one of the most complex orthographies ever employed by any culture anywhere at any time in human history.” The difficulty lies not merely in the number of characters that students must learn (roughly a couple of thousand), but also in the unpredictable nature of the ways these characters are used in Japanese. It is not possible in regular Japanese language classes to spend very much time on the writing system because the students must learn other aspects of the language in a limited number of class hours. This writing system is, however, not impossible to learn. In this half course, the students will learn the Japanese writing system historically and metacognitively, in group as well as individual sessions, and aim to overcome preconceived notions of difficulty related to the learning of Kanji. Each student in this class is expected to master roughly 500 Kanji that are used in different contexts. Requisite: Japanese 01 at Amherst College or its equivalent.

• About the course

Because the ability of reading and writing Kanji is different from student to student, the goal of each student will be determined individually. The average goal for a student is to learn (to write) at least 30 to 40 new Kanji per week (a student may make a larger goal in consultation with the instructor). The goal for the entire semester is for each student to learn to write at least 400-500 new Kanji.

• Kanji quizzes:

Since everyone is at a different level, each student will have his or her own folder in which the Kanji quiz sheets will be included.
• **Final examination**

You can choose a project or a final examination. You must let me know your decision two weeks before the last day of class. If you choose to take a final examination, it will be given during the final examination period (self-scheduled).

• **Grades:**

The final grade will be given based on:

1. Regular attendance
2. Weekly Kanji quizzes
3. Final project or final examination

**Recommended References:**


   This is a good source book for learning the origin of each character, or Kanji, which may help students of Japanese to learn Kanji more effectively. It even gives a mnemonic method for each character. A weakness of this book is that the model characters are not well drawn. It is very important for students to have well-formed models when practicing the characters. 673 pages total.

   Wolfgang Hadamitzky and Mark Spahn. Charles E. Tuttle Company.

   A concise Kanji dictionary, in which you can find all Joyo Kanji (the Kanji determined by the Japanese government to be necessary for all educated people to know – about 2000 Kanji) with necessary information, such as radicals, different readings, and example words for each Kanji. This is a very convenient first Kanji dictionary, but it is not a comprehensive one, so you will not be able to use it to look up words in Kanji compounds that you may need in intermediate and advanced Japanese classes. 394 pages total.


   This is a very compact and fun book about Kanji characters. The book explains the system of Kanji, its origins, and provides readings of Kanji compounds. It is light reading and quite entertaining. But you should be aware that some of the Kanji that the author uses are old; knowing old Kanji could be helpful in some ways but is not necessary. 159 pages total.
We have not ordered these books at any bookstores in town because we do not know how many students are interested in them. You can order any of them through any bookstores in town or via the internet.

The basic information on characters are given in our textbooks and will be explained in class, but having a book that explains them in greater detail will certainly facilitate your learning of the characters.

4. Amherst material: Kanji practice book (see the course website).

5. Many websites.