



## Reiwa explained (for non-Japanese)

Imagine that we, in the Netherlands, are living in the year Saevis Tranquillus 7, an era that started on April 30, 2013 with the ascension to the throne of King Willem-Alexander. His reign having been named after the famous sentence *Saevis tranquillus in undis* (calm amid the raging waters) used by the King's 16<sup>th</sup> century predecessor, stadtholder (governor) William of Orange, with the Kingfisher bird in mind and referencing a sentence from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The colours of this bird are orange, white and blue, showing that we Dutch also have no lack of symbols. As King Willem-Alexander has referred to this phrase in 2014 when praising his mother's reign, it would not be inconceivable that our King would have chosen this name if he would have had to choose his "era-name".

On May 1, 2019 the new Japanese Emperor ascended the Chrysanthemum throne and a new era or *genjo* started - with Year 1. Japan is the only country in the world that currently operates under the era name system, which has its roots in China, although it also commonly uses the western (Gregorian) calendar. As Japan runs these two calendars simultaneously, this is no small event, even if in daily life the usage of the *genjo* system is slowly declining as Japan integrates into the global economy. (A recent Mainichi newspaper survey showed that 34% of people said they still used mostly *genjo*, 34% said they used both systems about the same amount, and 25% use mainly the Western calendar. In 1975, 82% said they mostly used *genjo*.)

Major companies with relatively modern systems will most likely handle the shift without problems, but the full consequences are not entirely clear, and for many the change will not be inexpensive. Every government form, including tax returns and marriage registrations, uses the *genjo*-style calendar, which makes it impossible for government workers and companies to avoid implementing the new era-name. Already the costs are mounting. The city of Nagoya estimates it alone will spend about EUR 4.3 million preparing for the new era. In the city of Koga, employees preparing for the changeover accidentally erased 1,650 water bills. Scam artists have sent out letters that target older people, telling them to submit personal information supposedly to ensure that their bank accounts make the transition, according to the national broadcaster NHK.

The quest for a new *genjo* was, and is, a very secretive process. A nine-member panel was formed to select the candidate names. All members of the panel tasked with making the final choice were kept in a room at the prime minister's office which had been checked for bugs. Everyone involved in the final deliberations was required to hand in their phones and other mobile devices to prevent leaks. Officials had warned that any names leaked to the media ahead of the announcement would immediately be withdrawn. The chosen name was then approved by the cabinet.

It was difficult to guess what name would be selected, but there were some clues. The new name was unlikely to start with the first letter of any of the last four eras: Heisei, Showa, Taisho and Meiji. And because each era name is considered "sacred", any name put forward but rejected in the past cannot be proposed again. The name should be easy enough for school children to write, different to other recent era names, not widely forecast in advance and contain no characters closely associated with political or business interests.



As a result, there was a lot of public speculation. More than 10,000 entries were received in a competition run by a liquor company, whereby each of the contestants hoped to win a vintage bottle of sake from Year One of the Heisei era (1989). As far as I know, the bottle has not been awarded.

What is remarkable is the source for the new name. Prime Minister Abe said, as reported by Kyodo News, that the concept of the new era name was adopted from the *Man'yōshū*, Japan's oldest collection of poems from the late seventh to eighth centuries, marking the first departure from Chinese classics in the era system being in use. Japan's oldest poetry anthology comprises approximately 4,500 poems by more than 530 named Japanese poets and shows various verse forms, topics, and themes, with the oldest verses believed to date back to A.D.759. The collection has been historically an inspiration for Japanese poetry. The word "Rei" is used in the following poem:

*It was in new spring, in a fair ("Rei") month,  
When the air was clear and the wind a gentle ("wa") breeze.  
Plum flowers blossomed a beauty's charming white  
And the fragrance of the orchids was their sweet perfume.*

Moreover, again in the words of PM Shinzo Abe, now on his cabinet's website, "this name 'Reiwa' includes the meaning of culture coming into being and flourishing when people bring their hearts and minds together in a beautiful manner. It is also a Japanese work containing poems composed by people from a wide range of strata in society, including not only Emperors, Imperial Family members, and nobility, but also soldiers and farmers, and symbolizes Japan's rich national culture and long-established traditions."

On April 1, 2019 the name Reiwa was announced. In a two-day nationwide emergency opinion poll, conducted after the new Imperial era name was unveiled on Monday, 73.7% said they liked the name while 15.7% did not. Nearly 85%, meanwhile, saw the government's choice of a name from a Japanese classic, rather than a Chinese source, as a positive.

Obviously, the lives of 126 million Japanese will not drastically from before May 1, 2019 but as Junzo Matoba, a former bureaucrat who helped look for new names during the last years of Emperor Hirohito's Showa era in the late 1980s, said as quoted by the *Strait Times*: "Japanese people love to 'reset' things. A new era, a new mindset."

There were comments and objections on the name Reiwa as well. The first character, "rei," is often used to mean "command" or "order," imparting an authoritarian nuance that offends some. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his government prefer "good" or "beautiful", a less widely known sense. The second character, "wa," is defined as "peace" or "harmony", and together they mean "beautiful harmony." But Japan's consulate in New York had to dispel confusion. "Reiwa does not mean 'order and harmony' as has been reported in the press," the consulate said in a statement. "The name is chosen by the cabinet, rather than the emperor, from a short list proposed by scholars."

While many Japanese were positive about the new name, to some, particularly young people, it sounded harsh. "Do they mean 'Give in to orders?' They probably want another militarist era," said one Twitter user. One lawyer, Jiro Yamane, has even sued the government over the change in era, arguing that forcing people to measure time by the life of the emperor violates their constitutional right to individual dignity. "Only Japan exists in this different space and dimension of time," said Mr. Yamane, who is scheduled to argue his case in front of a



Tokyo district court at the end of May. "It's incompatible with international society. Why are the Japanese so hung up on it?" he added.

There are of course companies that directly benefit from this era-change, like manufacturers of private ink seals - commonly used in Japan to sign official documents. Software companies opened help-desks during the Golden Week from April 27 – May 6 to assist companies with implementing the change in date and era-name. The new era will force the country's sprawling bureaucracy to literally turn back the clock to Year 1. Experts compare it to Y2K, the digital threat in the lead-up to the year 2000, if on a much smaller and less consequential scale.

The happiest recipient so far has been the Real Estate Institute of Western Australia or in short: Reiwa.com. Its website traffic has been booming. Reiwa.com is hoping that Japan's new era also brings a new era in a market that is shrinking after a decade long mining-fuelled boom. "We want to embrace all of this traction and use it as an opportunity to entice migration and foreign investment back into our state," said Reiwa Chief Executive Neville Pozzi.

Contrary to the coronation of a new monarch in the Netherlands, which is a sober affair, the transition from one Emperor to his heir takes a considerable time. First of all: it is highly unusual for a Japanese Emperor to step down, so when Emperor Akihito informed his advisory council that he would eventually like to retire from his demanding job in 2010, no action was taken by senior members of the Imperial Household Agency. On 13 July 2016, national broadcaster NHK reported that the Emperor wished to abdicate in favour of his elder son Crown Prince Naruhito within a few years, and then things started to move. A potential abdication by the Emperor would require an amendment to the Imperial Household Law, which has no provision for such a move. On 8 August 2016, the Emperor gave a rare televised address, where he emphasized his advanced age and declining health; this address was interpreted as an implication of his intention to abdicate. On 8 June 2017, the National Diet passed a one-off bill allowing Emperor Akihito to abdicate, and for the government to begin arranging the process of handing over the position to Crown Prince Naruhito. The abdication was set to occur on 30 April 2019 and Emperor Akihito to receive the title of Jōkō (Emperor Emeritus), and his wife, the Empress, becomes Jōkōgō (Empress Emerita).

On March 12, 2019 Emperor Akihito reported his planned abdication to the sun goddess Amaterasu-ōmikami at the *Kashiko-dokoro* of the Three Palace Sanctuaries of the Imperial Palace. He also reported his upcoming abdication to the Ancestral Spirits of the Imperial Family, after which imperial messengers and priests were sent to the Ise Grand Shrine, a shinto shrine dedicated to the sun goddess Amaterasu. On March 15 special messengers visited the mausoleum of the first Emperor Jimmu, and the mausoleums of the four most recent Emperors to report Emperor Akihito's abdication, where they made offerings.

Also for the new Emperor Naruhito a long series of events and rituals begin. On May 1 the Emperor Naruhito inherits two of the three Imperial Regalia of Japan, the Imperial Sword and the Imperial Jewel, as well as the Privy Seal, and the State Seal at the *Seiden-Matsu-no-Ma* room or "State Hall") and this will conclude the enthronement. All this took place behind closed doors. The ascension ceremony in a state-room at the imperial palace made



history in another way: for the first time in the modern era, a woman was present. Satsuki Katayama, the sole woman in the cabinet of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, witnessed this first step in Naruhito's enthronement. But the new Empress, Masako, Naruhito's wife of 26 years, will not be allowed to attend - an illustration of the diminished status of women in the imperial family, and of the challenges women face more broadly in Japanese society. After ascension to the throne, a long string of events and rituals occur over the coming months. The official announcement to the public with a parade in Tokyo in a Toyota Century and the ritual reporting to the Sun Goddess Amaterasu of the conduct of the enthronement, will only take place on October 22, nearly six months after his ascension to the Chrysanthemum throne.

In the run up to this date of May 1, I have been asked by various radio and TV stations to elaborate on the new Emperor, his personality, his role and what his reign will change. These are difficult questions as the Emperor has little, if any, say in politics or on the economic performance of his country. Without any doubt he has a pleasant personality (I had the honour to meet him once, in 1984 when he visited the Netherlands, while he studied at Oxford and I noticed that his command of English was fine and he loved classical music), and I am sure that he will fulfil his duties in the same adequate and considerate way as his father did. But what this change of *genjo* really made me aware of, is how very traditional Japan, with both feet firmly standing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, still is. More than in the Netherlands, it is the ritual, the form or *kata*, that counts, and no better moment to witness this than the change at the top, even if the person at the pinnacle of the pyramid has no power but just a symbolic function. Time and continuity: this is what these rituals teach us. As an example: during the abdication of Emperor Akihito and the ascension to the throne of Emperor Naruhito, the Grand Shinto Shrine at Ise, Mie-prefecture, plays a major role, as this is the place where the sun goddess Amaterasu is worshipped. The Grand Ise shrine dates from 700 A.D., or even earlier. Every 20 years, locals tear down the Ise grand shrine, only to rebuild it anew. The process of rebuilding the wooden structure every couple decades helped to preserve the original architect's design against the otherwise eroding effects of time. Now, the shrine is created from natural materials that have a life that preceded their use as elements of the shrine's construction and will continue after they are part of the shrine. Trees are selected up to 200 years in advance to be included in the shrine, particularly those that will form central parts of the buildings' construction or have an important ritual purpose. Trees in the sacred forest that surrounds the shrine and other forests in Japan from which building materials may be drawn are monitored as they grow to determine their suitability; for example, the straightness of the trunk that would facilitate the cutting of long boards. Thus the trees' existence stretches hundreds of years into the past before they become a part of the building. Yet, these old trees also become new boards, planks, and beams. So: old and new, tradition and renewal, there is no better illustration how these realities blend into each other than the ceremonies in Japan on April 30 and May 1, 2019.

So where is the change in Japan? On April 9, with a new Imperial era just a few weeks away, Finance Minister Taro Aso revealed a new look for its currency. The government announced the first revamp of the 1,000 yen, 5,000 yen and 10,000 yen bank notes since 2004 and it is interesting to see the evolution of Japan's bank notes over the last decades. The



10,000 yen note will feature the father of Japanese capitalism, Eiichi Shibusawa, who founded an early Mizuho Bank predecessor and many other enterprises. The note was last changed in 1984, from ancient Prince Shotoku to Keio University founder Yukichi Fukuzawa, a renowned intellectual. From a prince via a scholar to a hardcore entrepreneur on a 10,000 yen note: it is a telling example of Japan's evolution rather than revolution. (For those among you who want to see the new notes: 少々お待ちください, distribution of the new bills will only begin in the first half of fiscal 2024. New coins will be released in October 2019.)

But what will change Japan really, is its size in terms of population. Reiwa starts, according to the most recent estimates, with 126.71 million Japanese, still the world's 10<sup>th</sup> most populous country. However, by 2050, when Emperor Naruhito will turn 90, Japan's total population could fall by as much as 30% to around 87 million and the reasons, quite simply, point to a rapidly ageing society. But also here: what is the change? In the 1950's Japan counted apr. 87 million inhabitants.

Let's wish that Reiwa will be a *genko* of prosperity in "beautiful harmony", just as its name says.

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