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Beautiful Harmony: Political Project Behind Japan's New Era Name

By Naoko Kumada

SYNOPSIS

The shifting dynamics around the new era name (gengō 元号) offers an opportunity to understand how the domestic politics of the LDP's project of ultranationalism is shaping a new Japan and a new form of nationalism.

COMMENTARY

THE NAMING of the new era marking the reign of Emperor Naruhito broke with fourteen centuries of precedent in drawing on a source other than the Chinese, mainly Confucian, Classics.

The meaning of this departure becomes clear when it is noted that *rei-wa*, rendered in official English translations as *Beautiful Harmony*, also reads in Japanese as *Beautiful Japan*, the political slogan of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's programme of constitutional revision to restore a pre-war Japanese polity based on Emperor-worship.

Beautiful Japan, Beautiful Harmony

Abe identifies himself with a political vision he calls 'Beautiful Japan'. In his book, *Toward a Beautiful Country* (2006), he described his desire to restore a 'beautiful' and 'proud' country with 'the Emperor Institution' at its core, and with Japan's 'perpetual history' and 'unique culture' as its 'national characteristic (*kunigara* 国柄)'.

'Beautiful Japan' is code for *kokutai* (国体), the pre-war, bio-political, romantic concept of Japan as a 'proud', 'beautiful' organic political body, 'a hundred million hearts beating as one', centered on a divine, 'unbroken line of Emperors'. In a related image, the emperor's subjects are conceived as his children, united in a family-state. This

term was banned during the Allied Occupation because it was considered the foundational concept of Japanese fascism.

[Abe's explanation for selecting Reiwa](#) as the new gengō merely repeats his ideas for 'Beautiful Japan'. He says he wants to pass on Japan's 'national characteristics (kunigara)' of 'perpetual history' and 'highly honoured culture' through gengō practice that has, alongside the 'long-standing tradition of Imperial Household', woven Japanese history. The government also announced [the official English translation of Reiwa \(令和\) as 'Beautiful Harmony'](#). 'Wa' is of course a homonym for Japan.

The Chinese Origin of Gengō

The cabinet sourced "Reiwa" from a body of ancient Japanese poetry (*Manyōshū*). This turn away from almost 1,400-year-old custom of drawing the name from the shared East Asian canon of Confucian texts can be seen as a continuation of the nationalist strategy of de-sinicisation started in the Meiji era.

Gengō (also called *nengō* 年号) practice dates from the 2nd century B.C. reign of Emperor Wu (武帝) of Han (漢). Under Chinese influence, it was also adopted in Japan, Korea and Vietnam.

From beginning of the 'Taika' era (大化 645 A.D.) to the end of the Edo period (1868), an emperor could have multiple gengōs over the time of his reign, or multiple emperors could reign during the course of one gengō. Gengō were changed following auspicious omens or inauspicious events (e.g. natural disaster, epidemic), or according to theories of ancient Chinese astrology (*shin i setsu* 讖緯説).

The adaptation of identifying an entire reign gengō, (*issē ichigen* 一世一元) only dates from China's Ming dynasty (1368-1644). The Meiji oligarchs took up this practice in 1868.

Gengō, the 'Unbroken Line of Emperors', and Kokutai

The adoption of a 'one reign, one era name' system was part of the Meiji oligarchy's project to construct a centralised, bureaucratic nation-state united around a divine Emperor. Japan's native religious traditions were re-organised around a public ideology and cult of State Shintoism.

State Shinto conceived the Emperor/State in organicist, racial, and religious terms as a nation-body, kokutai. It identifies this body with a Yamato race unique in the world and superior to any other by virtue of its origin and descent from an 'unbroken line of emperors' (*bansē ikkē* 万世一系) descended from the Shinto Sun Goddess Amaterasu. It commanded the religious awe and the absolute obedience of its subjects and became a basis for totalitarian mobilisation and militarisation.

This is the politico-theological nation-concept revived in Abe's political slogan and now the gengō: Beautiful Japan.

Gengō and Imperial vs Popular Sovereignty

Because the gengō system had come to be identified with the ideology of imperial sovereignty, the opposition has argued that it was incompatible with the popular sovereignty on which post-war Constitution is based.

Under the Constitution of the Empire of Japan (1889), a provision on gengō existed in Article 12 of the Imperial Household Law (1889). The post-war Constitution introduced popular sovereignty and limited the Emperor's role to a symbolic function. Accordingly, the gengō system lost its legal basis, particularly as the Allied Occupation discouraged its use because of its association with kokutai. While the gengō Showa continued to be used in official documents, coins, and newspapers after the War, its use was customary rather than legal.

Religious organisations such as the Association of Shinto Shrines and Nippon Kaigi (then 'Nippon o mamoru kai'), and conservative groups within the Liberal Democratic Party formed a movement to give gengō legal basis.

As a result, the Era Name Act was enacted in 1979. Article 1 of the Act prescribes that gengō is established by a cabinet order. Article 2 provides for the 'one reign, one era name' system.

At the popular level however, [the notion of a 'symbol emperor'](#), implying popular sovereignty, gained widespread support through Emperor Akihito's pointed efforts. Akihito's clear projection of a symbol emperor assuaged fears that the revival of gengō might lead to a revival of pre-war imperial doctrines.

A New Era Name and A New Nationalism

Reiwa is only the second reign, after Heisei, to have been named by the cabinet. Showa Emperor, Hirohito, was the last emperor to have had the final say on gengō under his reign.

A leading expert on classical Japanese literature [warns that Manyōshū had been a favoured source for pre-war texts promoting militarism](#). Despite such expressions of disquiet, there has been little public opposition this time, compared to the nation-wide debate as well as [143 terrorist and guerilla incidents in the year following Akihito's ascension to the throne](#) just three decades ago.

[An NHK opinion poll](#) shows the majority of the survey approving of Reiwa (81%) and of the use of Japanese classical literature (63%). Public support for the cabinet has risen in its wake.

The Abe government continues in its project of retrieving 'Beautiful Japan'. Its primary legislative agenda remains the amendment of the constitution, starting with Article 9 that enshrines Japan's pacifism. The ideas of patriotism and filial piety, which forms the family-state concept, have been revived in educational reforms. [The cabinet has revived its participation in State Shinto rituals at the Ise Shrine](#). The injection of 'Beautiful Japan' by the cabinet into the new gengō needs to be seen in this context.

Only time will tell how nationalism will develop in the time of Beautiful Harmony.

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