

The history of naming Japanese Imperial eras

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TOKYO -- As the new era name Reiwa representing the ideals of the public is set to be implemented upon the enthronement of Crown Prince Naruhito on May 1, attention is focused on the history of naming the Japanese Imperial eras in the past.

From the 10th century onward, for which the sources of the Japanese era names are known, all era names in this country were traditionally derived from Chinese classics.

In late March, a business figure versed in Chinese classics who is close to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told him, "If the new era name was quoted from Japanese classics, your name may go down in the history of era names (in an ironic sense)." The remark conveyed concerns that a conservative politician should follow the tradition of drawing on Chinese classics. Abe, however, reportedly did not reply.

Among Chinese classics that served as popular sources of Japan's past era names, the Five Classics of Confucianism from the pre-Christian era have been most heavily cited. Among them, the Book of Documents, China's oldest known history book, tops the list of citations at 36 times, followed by "I Ching" at 27 times. The Classic of Poetry, China's oldest poetry anthology, ranks eighth at 15 times. The older the scriptures are, the more authority they are believed to carry.

These five classics also provided sources of many expressions that appear in documents in later years, such as China's well-known history book, the Records of the Grand Historian, as well as Japanese classics that adopted the kanji character writings. "There are certain sources that experts would look up, with the Five Classics of Confucianism being the centerpiece," said an authority in Chinese literature. In fact, the four most recent era names -- Heisei, Showa, Taisho and Meiji -- all derived from the Five Classics of Confucianism. These names carried heavier weight as they were introduced under the "one era name for one reign" system adopted during the Meiji era.

Makoto Mekada (1904-1994), a late professor emeritus at Kyushu University who specialized in Chinese literature and was one of the scholars who devised era name candidates ahead of the change from Showa to the current Heisei era in 1989, also referenced those Chinese classics. His final 10

shortlists were cited from the Book of Documents, the Classic of Poetry, and I Ching. A memo handwritten by the professor when reviewing the candidate names was found in February this year.

In January, the Sankei Shimbun ran an article contributed by Nippon Foundation Chairman Yohei Sasakawa calling for the new era name to be not bound by the tradition of looking to Chinese classics. Sasakawa, 80, has repeatedly invited Prime Minister Abe and other figures to his private villa in Yamanashi Prefecture west of Tokyo.

This suggests that opinions over the era-naming custom are divided even among business figures close to Prime Minister Abe.

Since its inauguration, the Abe administration has typically emphasized the traditions and uniqueness of Japan, while playing up its efforts to reel out something "historic," with such pet phrases as "the first ever since the end of the war." It appears that this spurred talks of the possibility of the administration turning to Japanese classics in picking up the new era name.

Since the Meiji era (1868-1912), era names have also become part of the emperors' posthumous names. There was, however, an exception. When Empress Kojun, Emperor Akihito's mother, passed away in 2000, her posthumous name was derived from Japan's oldest anthology of Chinese poetry "Kaifuso," which dates back to the Nara period (710-794). Emperor Akihito decided on the name based on a proposal by the Imperial Household Agency's Archives and Mausolea Department.

As for the Emperor's daughter, Sayako Kuroda, her name Sayako and honorific name Norinomiya also originate from the oldest anthology of Japanese poetry "Manyoshu" (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves). Both names are said to have been given by University of Tokyo professor emeritus Senichi Hisamatsu (1894-1976), known for his study of Manyoshu.

A retired Imperial Household Agency official, who was involved in the naming of Imperial Family members, however, said, "It may be fine for the names of children (of the Imperial Family) to be drawn on Japanese classics, but when it comes to era names, they should be adopted from rather more universal sources as they concern the whole country."

(Mainichi)