

Japan's next era named Reiwa

April 1, 2019 (Mainichi Japan)



Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga raises a board bearing the new era name "Reiwa" during a press conference in Tokyo on April 1, 2019. (Mainichi)

TOKYO -- The government decided April 1 that the new era name when Crown Prince Naruhito accedes to the Imperial Throne one month from now will be Reiwa.

The Cabinet approved a government ordinance regarding the change from the current Heisei to Reiwa after hearing opinions on the proposed era name from a panel comprising experts from various fields, the heads and vice heads of both chambers of the Diet, and all Cabinet ministers.

The name is composed of two Chinese characters, or kanji. The first, "rei," has meanings including "good" or "beautiful," as well as "order" or "rule." The meanings of the second character, "wa," include "harmony," "peace," and "Japanese style."

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga announced on April 1 that the name comes from the "Manyoshu" (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves), the oldest extant anthology of classical Japanese

waka poetry.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said in a news conference the same day, "The era name represents a culture being born and nurtured by people's hearts coming together beautifully." He said that the name "Reiwa" was selected "in the hope that Japan will be a country where each Japanese person can achieve success with hopes for the future like plum flowers that bloom brilliantly after the severe cold."

In the passage of the "Manyoshu" from which the characters were selected -- a prologue to poems on plum blossoms -- the character for "rei" appears in the phrase "reigetsu," meaning "auspicious month," while the one for "wa," which can also be read "yawaragu," comes from the phrase "kaze yawaragu" -- a reference to "gentle" wind.

Emperor Akihito signed the government ordinance and it was promulgated the same day. The new era name will go into effect at the stroke of 12 a.m., May 1, the day Crown Prince Naruhito will become the new emperor.

Emperor Akihito, who will step down from the throne on April 30, will from then on be referred to as Emperor Emeritus.

This will be the second change in era names based on the Era Name Act that went into force in 1979. The first one took place when Emperor Hirohito (posthumously known as Emperor Showa) passed away and Emperor Akihito acceded to the throne. This time, however, is the first time since the Meiji era that a change in era name is taking place due to an emperor's abdication. Out of consideration for the impact the change will have on the lives of members of the public, it was decided that the new era name would be announced prior to the abdication and ascension.

In a rare video message released in August 2016 in which Emperor Akihito hinted at his apparent desire to abdicate, he said, "When the Emperor has ill health and his condition becomes serious, I am concerned that, as we have seen in the past, society comes to a standstill and people's lives are impacted in various ways."

This triggered debate within the government and the Diet, and a special law that made Emperor Akihito's abdication possible was passed in June 2017. That December, the Cabinet decided on the abdication and ascension dates.

In May last year, the government formulated a plan to announce the new era name one month before the actual name change. The government called for revamping information systems at government ministries and agencies in preparation for the change, and urged private companies and local government bodies to take all necessary measures.

For the most part, the procedures for selecting the new era name followed those taken in 1989 in the transition from the Showa era to Heisei. First, Prime Minister Abe commissioned a few scholars to come up with ideas for the new era name. Each scholar was asked to submit two to five proposals with the meaning and reasoning behind the names. The proposals were then narrowed down by Suga based on six criteria: its meaning is an appropriate ideal for the Japanese public; it is comprised of two kanji characters; it is easy to write; it is easy to read; it has never been used as an era name or a posthumous name of an emperor; and it is not a commonly used word.

Japanese era names are said to have started in the year 645 A.D. with the Taika era, and have continued for over 1,300 years since 701, the first year of the Taiho era. When the dual era names in the Nanbokucho (Northern and Southern Courts) period from 1336 to 1392 are included, Reiwa is Japan's 248th era name.

(Mainichi)

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