

national

# New era part of abdication dilemma

Talk of Emperor's intentions puts *genjo* tradition in the spotlight

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As the news reverberated throughout Japan earlier this month that Emperor Akihito intended to relinquish his throne while alive — in the first such move in about 200 years — the nation was struck by one of the biggest implications of his exit: the arrival of a new era.

The Emperor's abdication within the next few years, if true, would put an end to the current Heisei Era — introduced in 1989 following the death of his father, Hirohito (posthumously called Emperor Showa) — and usher in a

new era over the Gregorian calendar in a gamut of official IDs and documents from driver's licenses to health insurance cards and bank books.

For many Japanese, *genjo* is also a proud part of their identity, with phrases such as *Heisei umare* (born in Heisei) frequently used among today's youths to emphasize which era they were born in.

As was so with the recent death of veteran TV celebrity Kyosen Ohashi, *genjo* is also used to lament the passing of an era that the deceased was synonymous with.

**How did the system develop to become what it is today?**  
Before and during the war, the Emperor used to have the ultimate responsibility to determine the name of a new era upon his accession, as per the old version of the Imperial House Law.

But Japan's World War II surrender resulted in a major rewrite of the law under Allied Occupation, with no mention left of the era system.

Deprived of legal status, the tradition faced the danger of extinction, sparking mixed reactions.

The Science Council of Japan, for one, petitioned the government to abolish the system in 1950, labeling it impractical in that it makes Japanese historical events hard to keep track of in the global context.

Meanwhile, calls for its enshrinement into law gathered traction as the death of Emperor Hirohito loomed over the years, achieving new legal status in the 1970s, according to historian Isao Tokoro, a professor emeritus of Kyoto Sangyo University.

In 1979, after an opinion poll a few years earlier by the Cabinet Office found that 87.5 percent of the public used *genjo* in their daily lives, the Diet passed a law officially authorizing the Cabinet to designate eras.

One of the most strenuous pro-*genjo* campaigners was a right-wing organization called Nippon wo Mamoru Kai, a precursor to today's Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference).

From 1977 to 1979, Nippon wo Mamoru Kai, which roughly translates as "association to



Chief Cabinet Secretary Keizo Obuchi holds up the characters for Heisei as he announced the name of Japan's next era on the same day Emperor Hirohito died on Jan. 7, 1989. KYODO

protect Japan," lobbied strenuously nationwide for the law's enactment. That experience remains to date a great source of pride among the old guard of Japan Conference, according to Tamotsu Sugano, the author of best-selling book "Nippon Kaigi no Kenkyu" ("Study of Japan Conference"). "They think it's their own achievement that the law was enacted," Sugano said.

**When does the name of an era change?**

The 1979 Era Name Law stipulates the name of an era can only be updated in tandem with a change in the Imperial throne.

This rule is a holdover from the Meiji Era (1868-1912), when Japan — in what became a turning point in its centuries-old *genjo* system — adopted the "one reign, one era name" principle in emulation of China, meaning only one era name applies to the reign of each emperor.

This has contributed to the relative longevity of recent eras, including Meiji, which lasted 45 years, and Showa, which became the longest era ever, at 64 years.

But before the "one reign, one era name" system took hold, Japan had witnessed frequent changes in its era names, regardless of a new emperor's accession.

The changes had often taken place in the wake of calamities such as earthquakes, conflagrations, famines and epidemics, in the hopes of putting them behind. As a result, some had spanned only a few years.

**How is the name of an era determined in Japan?**

With the 1979 enactment of the Era Name Law, the power to name a new era shifted from an emperor to the Cabinet.

This, according to Tokoro, left the government scrambling to commission outside experts to come up with new era names behind closed doors so it could whittle them down to several in preparation for the sudden demise of Emperor Hirohito.

This was done in accordance with a government policy stipulating successful era names must fulfill conditions such as that they be read and written easily and not overlap with any existing Japanese word.

When Emperor Hirohito passed away at the age of 87 on Jan. 7, 1989, the government wasted no time in putting the shortlist of candidates to scrutiny by private experts and chairpersons of the two chambers of the Diet.

Within hours of Emperor Hirohito's death, then-Chief Cabinet Secretary Keizo Obuchi held an emergency news conference announcing to the public the start of the Heisei Era, meaning "achieving peace," effective the following day.

**Does the government already have plans on what to name the era after Heisei?**

Probably yes, although official acknowledgment is highly unlikely.

It's likely the government, according to Tokoro, already has candidates lined up for the next era as part of its preparation for the death of the current Emperor.

The government, however, has never admitted to such an early preparation publicly, because any assumption that the Emperor's days are numbered is taboo.

But Emperor Akihito's reported wish to abdicate, if true,

would make any talk of the next era more acceptable, Tokoro said.

"Traditionally you were supposed to discuss new *genjo* while in grief" after an emperor's death, he said.

"But if it is decided that the Emperor will relinquish his throne, say, four years later, then the government may be able to discuss new names with greater openness."

**How would the start of a new era influence society?**

The news that Emperor Akihito's abdication would put an end to Heisei left Japan's social media abuzz with speculation that a significant burden will be added to the workload of computer programmers and engineers, in an echo of the panic that swept through the world when it was on the cusp of entering 2000.

Chiba-based programmer Ayano Nakano, whose job includes developing smartphone apps and websites, agreed the end of Heisei will mean a lot of work adjusting systems.

"Each revision is relatively easy to make, but the fact that you need to apply those small revisions to every content concerned is a very laborious task. It will even add a national holiday," Nakano, 39, said.

Currently, Dec. 23, the birthday of Emperor Akihito, is designated a national holiday, while that of Emperor Showa on April 29 also remains a holiday in what is known as Showa Day.

Tokoro, however, plays down the possibility of chaos.

"If the Emperor truly abdicates, the timing of his exit will likely be announced in advance, meaning we'll have a good amount of time to work on the changes that need to be made, such as those on driver's licenses and bank books," he said.

"So no confusion is likely."

## FYI: JAPAN'S ERA SYSTEM

*new genjo*, the Japanese term for an era name, for the first time in about 30 years.

The following is a look into *genjo*, Japan's unique way of identifying a year:

### How does *genjo* work?

The practice originated in ancient China, but historians say Japan is the only country that still adheres to it, as opposed to the internationally used Gregorian, or Western, calendar.

*Genjo* has no year zero, with 1989, for example, called Heisei 1 instead of Heisei 0. The year 2016 corresponds to Heisei 28.

It is also possible that two different *genjo* co-exist in the same year, as in 1989, when Emperor Hirohito, who represented the Showa Era (1926-1989), died on Jan. 7 that year. The first seven days of 1989 are recognized as Showa 64, while the rest is Heisei 1.

Each *genjo* is said to represent an ideal of an era and in principle consists of two auspicious kanji, including *hei* (peace), *ei* (eternal), *ten* (heaven) and *an* (safety).

The first such era started in 645 under the name of Taika, whose provenance is unknown, paving the way for as many as 247 era names leading up to Heisei.

Antiquated as it seems, the use of these Japanese eras remains very pervasive in today's society, taking precedence



Emperor Hirohito and his son, Akihito, read the U.S. military's Stars and Stripes newspaper in a photo taken in December 1945. JAPAN CAMERA INDUSTRY INSTITUTE/VIA KYODO