Iva Lakić Parać, University of Zagreb, Croatia

From Meiwa to Reiwa: Rethinking Images of "Distinctive Japan"

Abstract

From ancient times, with the adoption of the Chinese cultural framework, to the modern era of introducing Western culture, Japan has defended its cultural boundaries with the image of a distinctive self. This paper will question some of the established interpretations of classical Japanese poetry by examining the thoughts and ideas of the Japanese scholar Kamo no Mabuchi. Mabuchi wrote his most important works during the Meiwa era (1764-1772) and is, among all, famous for his interpretation of Man'yōshū, an ancient collection of Japanese poetry, from which the new Japanese era name Reiwa was recently taken. This paper will attempt to deconstruct some of the mechanisms of how classical Japanese literature and images of the past continue to be used as a means of "nation-building" in times of crisis.

Keywords: Man'yōshū, kokugakusha, Kamo no Mabuchi, Reiwa, Japanese nationalism

1. Introduction

Japan uses eras, or nengō (年号), as part of its traditional calendar system. Although the Gregorian calendar is officially used, the use of the era system still prevails in official documents, cultural practices (traditional events and artifacts), and everyday life (newspapers, legal context). The era system has been in use since 645 CE during the reign of Emperor Kōtoku (the Taika era). This long-standing tradition connects modern Japan to its past, maintains a sense of cultural continuity, and sets Japan apart from countries that exclusively use the Gregorian calendar, making it an important part of cultural identity.

Meiwa 明和 was an eighteenth-century era that lasted for a short period (1764-1772). The name is a compound of the kanji characters 明mei (“bright”) and 和wa (“harmony”), the era name meaning “bright harmony.” The literature of this period records concerted attempts to distill the aggregate characteristics of the inhabitants of Edo (today Tokyo) or edokko, and to draw a contrast between edokko and those who did not have their “sophisticated” characteristics—those who were not from the city of Edo, such as merchants from the Kyoto-Osaka region or samurai from distant provinces (Nara 1). Meanwhile, the kokugaku (“national studies”) movement of the period attempted to distill the distinctive character of the Japanese people and culture in contrast to the prevalent atmosphere of the evaluation of the imported elements of Chinese culture, at least at the official level. The need to separate the elements of Chinese culture and distinctively Japanese culture, or the tendency to distinguish Japan and others, is something that shaped the Japanese national identity from the very beginning. Even today, it remains a card to play when calling for national unity, and the name of the new era, Reiwa, reflects some of those sentiments. Although its official meaning, “beautiful harmony,” seems rather benign, the selected kanji characters are interpreted in multiple ways, and so the name’s meaning appears ambiguous, with some even finding it sinister.

This paper begins by collecting the commentary of ordinary people (Japanese and foreign), newspapers, and online articles on the subject, indicating that the public has been divided by the new era name. Next, it will deconstruct the meaning of the name with an in-depth analysis of the kanji characters. Finally, explaining the history of using classic literature in times of crisis, the paper will demonstrate that understanding the mechanism of reinterpretation of classical literature in modern times may be crucial for an appropriate understanding of the new era name.

2. Reiwa, or the “Beautiful Harmony”

The current Japanese era Reiwa, 令和, began on 1 May 2019, following the 31st (and final) year of the Heisei era (1989-2019). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan explained the meaning of Reiwa as “beautiful harmony,” and the Prime Minister at the time, Shinzō Abe, said that Reiwa represents “a culture being born and nurtured by people coming together beautifully.” He said:

I made this decision with the hope that each person will be able to make each flower bloom big, with hopes for tomorrow, just like the plum blossoms in full bloom, announcing the arrival of spring (…) It means that culture is born and nurtured when people bring their hearts together beautifully. I sincerely hope that the people will widely accept the new era name and that it will become deeply rooted in the lives of the Japanese people. ("Shin gengō"; my trans.)[1]

Regarding the source of the poem, the Man'yōshū anthology, he said: "Compiled over 1,200 years ago, the Man'yōshū is Japan's oldest poetry anthology. It is a national calligraphy that symbolizes the rich national culture and long traditions of our country." He continued:

Eternal history, fragrant culture, and beautiful nature that changes with the seasons. We will firmly pass on these national characteristics of Japan to the next generation. Just like the plum blossoms, which herald the arrival of spring after the bitter cold and bloom beautifully, every Japanese person can make their flowers bloom with their hopes for tomorrow. We have decided to call it "Reiwa" with the hope that Japan will be like that. We will open up a new era full of hope together with the people of Japan, embracing our heartfelt gratitude for the days of peace in which culture can be nurtured and the beauty of nature can be admired. ("Reiwa: Nihon no kunigara"; my trans.)[2]

Abe stressed the history and positive interpretation of the name, however, experts also said that, without doubt, the new era name reflects his conservative political agenda that emphasizes national pride. For example, the Tokyo Review reports that:

Prime Minister Abe focused on the Man'yōshū poem from which it is drawn in his explanation, noting that a □□ reigetsu in this classical context referred to a fine early spring month, while □ was used as in □□□ yawaragu, "to soften or abate," referring to mild spring winds. The era name, Abe explained, expresses hope that the new era will be one in which the Japanese people thrive following a period of coldness. The inclusion of □ rei is likely to be divisive, however, as the character is commonly found in words such as □□ meirei "order/command" or □□ hōrei (law,ordinance). One other possible interpretation is that the name is a nod to Japan's constitution – "a decree for peace" – which the present administration hopes to amend in the coming years. (Fahey)

No doubt, the new era name raised questions in people's minds. Here are some of the article titles taken from online newspapers and magazines that tried to explain the name to the public. The New York Times announces: "Japan's New Era Gets a Name, but No One Can Agree What It Means" (Rich). The Japan Times stressed: "What's in a Name? Reiwa Reflects Today's Politics, Japan's Cultural History and Social Philosophy" (Yoshida). Mainichi shinbun asks: "The New Era Name 'Reiwa': What Do We Know About Its Source 'Man'yōshū'?" explaining that "Man'yōshū contains more than 4,500 poems of various people, from the emperor to the common soldiers called sakimori, who defended the west country" (Takenaka). The Daily Shincho explains: "The closest Japanese word to rei is 'beautiful,' as explained by a scholar of Japanese literature and the name's creator" ("Rei' ni ichiban").

People were rather confused by the name, as evident from the following questions posed on the online forum Quora:

I'm confused about the name of the new Japanese era. Can you explain it to me?

What do you think of the new era name of Japan?

What can we make of Japan's new era name? How is it intended to impact the lives of people living in Japan?

Why are you happy with Reiwa as the name for Japan's new era?

These are some of the comments:

Rei-wa. Two Chinese characters with a few translations possible. The official one is 'beautiful harmony.' There is an element of compulsion in one of the readings of rei, making for some jokes about 'forced harmony,' but that is NOT a required reading. 'Beautiful harmony' is official, so that's the one that was (officially) meant. (Youmans)

Well, I'm just on a long vacation here (27 years), so I haven't formed any strong opinion of it. The meaning and origin of the kanji are respectively 'auspicious' (rei in old Japanese) and peace or harmony (wa). There are some seasonal inferences from an old Japanese text such as a warm wind coming to coax out the cherry and plum blossoms. In other words, they could imply an upcoming period of hope and prosperity. If I had to say one way or another, I have a generally good impression of it. (Pattimore)

I don't like it. Rei is most commonly used in the word meirei, which means 'command'. Prime Minister Abe explained that it comes from Man'yōshū and means 'happiness', but rather, rei makes me think of military commands and wars. I am worried that Japan will drift to the right even more and get out of control. And wa reminds of Showa era (1926–1989), in which Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and started the Japan-US war, in which lots of lots of people, not only Japanese soldiers, were killed. Japan also invaded China, Korea, and Pacific islands, if temporarily. I think it will take a lot of effort and protest to make the Reiwa era a peaceful one. (Furukawa)

I believe it has a good meaning in Japanese, but unfortunately it has a dubious meaning in Chinese. Reiwa; rei can mean 'mandate,' wa can mean 'Japanese.' Indeed, it was the Japanese themselves who chose this character to represent their ethnicity. Therefore, reiwa can mean 'mandate the Japanese.' Concerning the Japanese, this is the first meaning that came to my mind when I saw the name. However, when they picked the name, they absolutely didn't have to think about what the name could mean in another language. As long as it has a good meaning in their language, it is OK. I just honestly answered the question without any prejudice. (Koysiripong)

I think it is very thoughtfully chosen and gives us a hint, on what is the direction the last government is heading towards. Let's hope for the best. (Ivanov)

I think the name that was chosen seems like something that the conservative Prime Minister Shinzo Abe would choose, emphasizing 'Japanese values' and avoiding giving any credit to Chinese Classical works. Upon reflection, the cynical part of me thinks this naming symbolizes very well the Japanese government's approach to governance: peace and order through social control. I don't really like the usage of the character rei which has a real connotation of force, ordering around and commanding, though it may grow on me over time. (Ishigaki)

It has a pleasant sound and the poem it comes from is nice. I'm told by Japanese friends that the two kanji go together unnaturally and so it feels a little strange. And it is a little strange. In modern Japanese rei almost always means command. (LaSpina)

Just to correct the other poster, it is actually□□ "Reiwa"—roughly Orderly Peace. Japan's post-shogunate era names have all been something pleasant and innocuous evoking order and peace—this is no exception obviously. I would say the era name has little proactive intention to

impact lives or reflect where Japan is headed. Much like Japanese society the new name plays it safe and doesn't deviate in any big way from established precedent. It's just a name. (Gerrard)

I, like many of my friends in Japan, feel it is a bit…dark, or perhaps sinister. The official explanation is that it signals order and a return to Japanese cultural values, which sounds exactly like every nationalistic slogan ever in the history of the world. (Gerrard)

One twitter user said: "The idea that you should just give in to orders from those above you -- that's probably their wish but that doesn't give me the sense they want peace for ordinary people" (qtd. in Reuters). "The name sounds as if we are ordered to achieve peace, rather than doing so proactively," Kazuto Hongo, a University of Tokyo historian, said on TV Asahi ("Reiwa, Japan's").

Yoshinori Kobayashi, a conservative cartoonist who has written books on Japanese emperors, said the character rei portrays "the people kneeling under the crown (…) Its meaning, after all, is a command of a monarch or a ruler (…) It is inevitable that 'Reiwa' gives a somewhat cold impression" ("Reiwa, Japan's").

Even though a public opinion survey conducted jointly by Sankei Shimbun and Fuji News Network found that 87% of respondents approved of the new era name (Yokoyama, Fukabori), reading the online comments and newspaper articles suggests that there were also difficulties in understanding the meaning of the new name.

3. A Closer Examination of the Kanji "Reiwa"

While the public opinion was somehow divided, as for the kanji characters for Reiwa, the Japanese top politicians explained that they derived from the kotobagaki ("headnote") attached to a group of 32 poems about plum blossoms (815-846) in Volume 5 of the Man'yōshū. The specific poem was composed by Otomo no Tabito (665-731), the famous poet and governor of Dazaifu in Kyushu, praising the beauty of the surrounding nature at a poetry party held for a group of friends in the plum garden at his mansion, it reads as follows:

Original kanbun text: □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

Classical Japanese translation (kanbun kundoku):

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ *Toki ni, shoshun no reigetsu ni shite, kiyoku kaze yawaragi, ume wa kyōzen no ko o hiraki, ran wa haigo no kō o kaorasu*

English translation:

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.

Below is a word-by-word translation:

□□beginningof, early	□□gentle	□□orchidflower
□□spring(the season)	□□plumflower	□□scent
□□auspicious	□□cover	□□jadependant that is worn at the waist.
□□month	□□mirror	□□behind
□□air	□□front	□□perfume
□□fresh,clear	□□of	
□□wind	□□powder	

The kanji characters from a poem about spring, which mentions soft winds and plum blossoms, are references easily recognized by scholars but not familiar to most people. Furthermore, a closer examination of each kanji reveals some rather tricky meanings. Rei (令), aside from "good," also means "orders, laws, command, decree" and these are the first significations that come into mind (to the ordinary people) when thinking about the meaning of that particular kanji. What follows is the definition of Reiwa found on jisho.org (an online Japanese-English dictionary):

令

Meanings: orders, laws, command, decree, good

On reading: レイ (rei)

和

Meanings: harmony, Japanese style, peace, soft, Japan

Kun readings: やわ.らぐ (yawaragu)、 やわらげる (yawarageru)、 なごむ (nagomu)、 なごやか (nagoyaka)、 あえる (aeru)

On readings: ワ (wa)、 オ (o)、 カ (ka)

When giving on Japanese reading compounds of kanji character rei, jisho.org lists the following examples:

令状 【レイジョウ】 warrant, summons, written order

号令 【ゴウレイ】 order (esp. to a number of people), command, ritual of bowing at start and end of school class

政令 【セイレイ】 government ordinance, cabinet order

If one takes a closer look at the wa in Reiwa, it stands for “harmony, Japanese style, peace, soften” but also for “Japan.” In fact, it was a name for Japan used in ancient Chinese historical books.[3] Reading compounds given by jisho.org are as follows:

On reading[4] compounds of the kanji character和:

和 【ワ】 sum, harmony, peace, Japan, Japanese-style

和歌 【ワカ】 waka, classic Japanese poem

講和 【コウワ】 reconciliation (between warring nations), (making of) peace

英和 【エイワ】 English-Japanese, English-Japanese dictionary

阿蘭陀 【オランダ】 Netherlands, Holland

和尚 【オショウ】 priestly teacher, preceptor, monk (esp. the head monk of a temple), priest, head priest, second highest priestly rank in Buddhism, master (of one's art, trade, etc.)

和声 【ワセイ】 harmony, concord, consonance

和尚 【オショウ】 priestly teacher, preceptor, monk (esp. the head monk of a temple), priest, head priest, second highest priestly rank in Buddhism, master (of one's art, trade, etc.)

諧和 【カイワ】 gentle mutual affection, harmony, harmony

Kun reading compounds of the kanji character 和:

和らぐ 【やわらぐ】 to soften, to calm down, to be eased, to be mitigated, to subside, to abate

和らげる 【やわらげる】 to soften, to moderate, to relieve

和む 【なごむ】 to be softened, to calm down

和やか 【なごやか】 mild, calm, gentle, quiet, congenial, amicable, amiable, friendly, genial, harmonious, peaceful

和える 【あえる】 to dress (vegetables, salad, etc.)

The above analysis clarifies the linguistic ambiguities regarding the name of the Japanese new era. Placed in the Man'yōshū literary context, the kanji can be read to mean “fortunate” or “auspicious,” and “peace” or “harmony,” but the name has authoritarian overtones because the first character also means “order” or “command,” and features in the Japanese words for official announcement and law. The second character also appears in Yamato, an old word for Japan that has militaristic connotations. Some experts remember that the proposed era “Reitoku,” with the same first character, “rei,” was rejected by the Tokugawa shogunate in 1864 because of its authoritarian tone and because it sounded like the emperor was commanding Tokugawa (Dusinberre).

Shinzo Abe, the former Prime Minister assassinated in 2022 while speaking at a political event— a conservative leader who was considered a right-wing nationalist by some — has come under fire for hawkish actions, including visiting a controversial shrine to wartime leaders, alongside his membership of an ultra-nationalist lobby group that denies some of Japan’s wartime crimes. Kenneth J. Ruoff, an expert on Imperial Japan, maintains that the choice he made for the era name was “unquestionably significant” (qtd. in Rich).

While no one can agree on the meaning of the name, to fully understand the Man'yōshū literary context, we must go at least 200 years back in history.

4. Man'yōshū as the Source for the New Era Name

Japanese literature scholar Susumu Nakanishi, who is considered the leading expert in the field of Man'yōshū research, and perhaps the one who came up with the name, explained in an interview with The Sankei Shimbun that the term reiwa has the additional connotation of “praying for peace” and original meaning of the kanji character for rei was “beauty achieved through proper form” and “beautiful goodness” (Yokoyama and Fukabori). That is why the mission of the Japanese people in the new era should be to spread a spirit of “beautiful peace and harmony” throughout the world. He said:

Up until now all gengo (Japanese eras) have been derived from Chinese sources. So, isn’t it about time that Japan looked to its own literature for the name of what is, after all, a new Japanese era? Heisei, the era name of the recently-retired Emperor Akihito, for example, was a very basic slogan extolling equality and peace. Therefore, following up on that, I think the use of the wa from heiwa (meaning “peace”) seems very appropriate to this new era in which Japan is seeking to spread the wonderful spirit of peace throughout the world. (qtd. in Yokoyama and Fukabori)

Nakanishi is confronting Reiwa with Heisei平成 for its peaceful connotations, but in online comments, the new era name has more often been confronted with Showa昭和 for the shared second kanji. One of the comments listed above said that wa in Reiwa brings to mind the period of nationalistic Showa past.

Nakanishi also emphasizes that, for the first time, the nengō name was chosen from a non - Chinese source. The Tokyo Review reports that “[t]he panel of experts charged with choosing a new era name generally delve into classical Chinese literature for their choices, but the involvement of experts in Japanese literature and history this time raised the possibility of a name drawn from a Japanese classical work” (Fahey). As for the meaning and intention behind the name, it says that “it will likely be a topic of discussion for scholars for some time” (Fahey).

The Guardian article “Reiwa: How Japan’s New Era Name is Breaking Tradition” asserts that the name of a new era “represents a break with centuries of tradition as the first era name to have been inspired by a Japanese, rather than Chinese, work of classical literature. The characters are taken from a stanza in a poem about plum blossoms that appears in Man'yōshū, the oldest existing collection of Japanese poetry, compiled sometime after 759” (McCurry).

Man'yōshū is considered one of the most important texts of classical Japanese literature. Still, the collection was relatively unknown until the mid-Meiji period (Shirane and Suzuki 31). Nowadays, it is taught in Japanese language classes (jap. kokugo国語) in schools, and it is common for students to learn the most famous poems by heart. In large anthologies of Japanese literature, it is often emphasized that one of the most striking characteristics of the collection is that it includes poems from different social classes, from the aristocracy to ordinary people, and that the style in which the poems are written is simple, direct and filled with sincere emotions. These characteristics have been emphasized in all major textbooks, anthologies, reference books, and dictionaries from the second half of the Meiji period to the present day (Yoshikazu 31-51). This collection, together with other works of Japanese classic literature, such as Kojiki from Nara period (710-794) or Genji monogatari from Heian period (794-1185), in the pre-modern period Tokugawa period (1600-1867) came to represent the “pure” Japanese spirit, uncontaminated by foreign influence, and as such, reference material for shaping what was supposed to be the “unique” Japanese national identity.

As can be noticed, according to this hierarchy, vernacular fictional prose was at the bottom, while poetry in the Japanese language was one step higher than prose. Consequently, the cultural identity of Japan from the very beginnings of literacy was framed and influenced by genres of foreign, Chinese provenance (jap. kara) from the top of the scale. In contrast, genres in the Japanese language, which will eventually begin to identify with the national Yamato culture, for centuries up to the pre-modernity period, in fact have no approximate value as texts in the Chinese language (but written by the Japanese).[5] This hierarchy will only be attempted to be reversed by kokugaku scholars in the eighteenth century.

Kokugaku group saw a threat of “foreign influences” in Japanese literature and wanted to extract what is “inherently indigenous Japanese” and which, in their view, is not influenced by Chinese culture and language. They positioned poetry (waka) and prose (monogatari) in the Japanese language at the top of the hierarchy and claimed to de-canonize the remaining four categories of texts in the Chinese language with all their might. However, their hierarchy will only become irreversible with the rise of modern nationalism in the mid-Meiji period and China’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese War. Throughout the pre-modern period (modernity came to Japan with the opening of the country to the West in 1868), the Japanese word for “study” gakumon 学問actually

meant “study of Chinese texts” (漢学, kangaku), and it was only with the establishment of the study of national literature (国文学, kokubungaku) in the mid-Meiji period that Japanese literature began to refer to texts in the Japanese language (written in kana), although not entirely.

Kokugaku had a very clear Other: China and kangaku—studies of Chinese classics. Under the eighteenth-century Tokugawa Shogunate, Confucianism (neo-Confucianism) was the established academic discipline enjoying the Shogunate’s protection. In this intellectual climate, kokugaku, concentrated on exploring “What is Japan?”, was a radical movement challenging the established way of thinking. Kokugaku scholars studied Japanese ancient texts to uncover the uncontaminated “essence of Japaneseness,” something that was before foreign influences, i.e., Buddhism and Confucianism, firmly established themselves in Japan.

However, literacy itself was introduced in Japan only after adopting the Chinese writing system. That means that Man'yōshū was written in the eighth century, before the adoption of the Japanese kana script. It was written in manyōgana, the script that uses Chinese characters in a rather complicated way, and very few experts could read the poems in their original form, even in the distant past. The kokugaku scholars were those experts, but their job was philological in the first place. Based on these painstaking endeavors, these scholars argued that Japan in antiquity was a country where perfection in every aspect of life—human behavior, governance, order—was realized naturally through the “true heart.” Human beings were good, and life was effortlessly harmonious because of the ancient ways of Japan, which prevailed as the expression of the true heart.

Kamo no Mabuchi (1697–1769), one of the main figures of the kokugaku movement, produced essays on various topics. Still, the focus of his study was a philological analysis of the Man’yōshū. He believed that the poems recorded in this collection brought words and spirit (kokoro) of Japan before these were Sinicized and thereby corrupted during the Nara period of the eighth century. Mabuchi depicted the Japan of the Man’yōshū as “natural arcadia ruled by the descendants of the kami who governed following a Way (michi) that conformed to the natural rhythms and dictates of nature” (Fujiwara and Nosco).

Mabuchi taught that if one advances to the stage of being able to recite the most ancient Manyōshū verses aloud, one will be affected to the point where only one’s body remains mired in

the here-and-now, as one's language and heart (kokoro) are transported back to the ancient past. In this process, one will spontaneously acquire the virtues of that past—truthfulness, directness, manliness, vitality, and native elegance—which were the antithesis of the notoriously corrupt political culture of his time. He became virulently anti-Chinese, insisting that the absence of native Japanese words for the classic Confucian virtues was evidence that such teachings were unnecessary in ancient Japan when life enjoyed a morally and ethically untutored order rooted in its conformity to the natural rhythms of heaven and earth.[6]

Kamo no Mabuchi focused on the poetic language in Manyōshū, saying that the poetic style used "follows the nature of heaven and earth contained in the poem," where he finds a "dignified and honest heart" and "masculine style" (jap. masurao buri). His emphasis on Manyōshū `s "virtuous, direct and strong"—masculine—poetic style was opposed to another concept, taoyame buri, or feminine poetic style, which he associated with excessive poetic techniques that prevailed in the poetry of the next "corrupted" generations. He considered masurao buri style to be authentically "Japanese" while the former is considered as something that has been imported from China. Through his analysis of the Man'yōshū, Mabuchi sought to uncover the deeper meanings and values embedded in the language and poetry of ancient Japan and to connect these to the cultural identity of the Japanese people in general. He extended this spirit of ancient Japan not only to the style of poetry but also to the way individuals should behave.

Explaining the Manyōshū as the source of a new era name, Japanese site japanesewiki.com reports:

> *The Manyōshū is extremely valuable in that it contains many poems written by commoners in the sakimori no uta (Sakimori's poems)*[7] *and azumauta for example. The poems written by commoners are characterized by a simple and straightforward style rather than using showy techniques. Kamo no Mabuchi called the poems in this category masurao buri (manly poetical style). (Ueno and Suzuki)*

Mabuchi's interpretation of Man'yōshū as an expression of masurao buri was part of the larger project of studying and celebrating Japan's unique cultural and linguistic heritage during Tokugawa regime. However, in the next period of Japanese history, masura oburi began to be associated with

the masculine ideal of the warrior. It will become an embodiment of the martial spirit and the ideal of the strong heroic warrior, closely associated with the samurai class and a reflection of their values of courage, loyalty, and honor. Man'yōshū will become a tool for uplifting the fighting spirit of the Showa war regime, especially the sakimori no uta will be used as a typical example of expressions of loyalty and patriotism![8] According to Japanese scholar Kajikawa, this "fighting spirit," which has been called the manyō seishin by the same regime, has been simply renamed masurao buri after the war and masurao buri is nothing but manyō seishin dressed in new clothes, presented under the authority of kokugaku and introduced as such into Japanese textbooks and the education system (Kajikawa 2).

Explaining to their readers the source of "Reiwa," Mainichi Shinbun reports:

> *Man'yōshū is the oldest surviving collection of Japanese poetry that contains about 4,500 poems spanning about 350 years, from a poem said to have been composed by the empress of Emperor Nintoku to a poem from the era of Emperor Junnin (759). Edited by the poet Otomo no Yakamochi, it is widely known for not only the works of emperors and aristocrats, but also poems of people of a wide range of social status, including lower-ranking government officials. There are many songs that are known to the general public, such as sakimori no uta. (Takenaka)*

One of the reasons sakimori no uta or "songs of the frontier guards"[9] are widely known to the public is that the wartime Showa regime used those songs as an example of expressions of loyalty and patriotism and therefore as a tool for uplifting fighting spirit. However, a close reading of the sakimori no uta reveals that most of the poems written by young soldiers are love songs or deeply sad songs that talk about the departure and separation from loving families (Cranston 629). What strikes immediately is the youth of the sakimori, as suggested by the many poems that speak of parting with parents rather than wives and children. How, then, these poems become representative patriotic poems if not by reinterpretation similar to that of Yakamochi's poem?

In his article, Kajikawa deals with the problem of how masurao buri is presented in textbooks and instruction books, mostly in relation to its connection with the manyō seishin concept and how, considering this issue, the Man'yōshū collection should be reviewed today. He concluded that Man'yōshū is still taught as a collection of "simple" and "frank" poems based on a "pure" spirit, the

same way it was touted under the wartime regime of the Showa era when the Manyō spirit was thought of as one form of the "Japanese spirit" of reverence, loyalty, and patriotism and used as a tool to raise this fighting spirit during the war. However, masurao buri is a concept first used by Kamo no Mabuchi when discussing the「歌風 or the poetic style in Man'yōshū, and which, at the time, did not have militaristic connotations. Even though Mabuchi`s masurao buri and the Manyō seishin used by Showa wartime propaganda should not be considered the same, this parallel continued to be drawn in national textbooks during and after the war.

The song "Umi yukaba" is a known example of how the Showa war regime reinterpreted the Man'yōshū poems. During the Great East Asian War, it was called the quasi-national anthem or the second national anthem (although it was not legally recognized). Originally, the poem was written to celebrate the imperial edict and to express the poet's gratitude towards the emperor, but the small part of that eighth-century chōka eventually came to be sung before takeoff by many kamikaze suicide attack pilots in the final stages of the Pacific War.

Re-examining modern Japanese nationalism, Susan L. Burns explained that kokugaku scholars believed that their contemporaries "could resist the public realm ordered by the Chinese mind by recovering the language of the ancient world and the consciousness it embodied" (qtd. in Yamashita 215-220). In this, they saw the emperor as occupying a special position as regards the gods, language, and rites. Moreover, the leading character of the movement, Motoori Norinaga, articulated the four strategies comprising the kokugaku discourse. The first highlighted language as the primary "bearer of identity and difference"; the second focused on the "origin and nature of cultural difference"; the third examined the relationship of "community" and "power"; and the fourth created a new political vocabulary focused on the emperor. These four strategies, Burns contends, enabled a new vision of Japan.

5. Conclusion

Considering the strong impact the kokugaku discourse had on the construction of modern Japanese nationalism, this study aimed to highlight the mechanisms used to adopt eighteenth-century concepts to the needs of the nation-building process from Meiji onward. The reinterpretation of the concept of masurao buri in the Showa period shows how classical Japanese

literature and images of the past were used as a means in times of crisis. A deeper understanding of those mechanisms allowed us to approach the meaning of the new era name from a different perspective. It is true that when situated in the Man'yōshū classical literary context, the kanji 令和 (reiwa) can be read to mean “fortunate” or “auspicious,” and “peace” or “harmony.” However, as the in-depth analyses of the linguistic and literary context indicates, the name has authoritarian overtones too, with the first character also meaning “order” or “command” and the second appearing in Yamato, an old word for Japan that has militaristic connotations. Considering the use of Man'yōshū in the recent past, this ambiguity of the new era name only leads to the question of whether it was intentional or not.

Works Cited

Carr, Michael. “Wa Wa Lexicography.” International Journal of Lexicography, vol. 5, no. 1., Spring 1992, pp. 1-30, https://doi.org/10.1093/ijl/5.1.1.

Cranston, A. Edwin. A Waka Anthology: Volume One: The Gem-Glistening Cup. Stanford UP, 1993.

Dusinberre, Martin. “Greeting the New Era in Japan.” Geschichte der Gegenwart, 19 June 2019, geschichtedergegenwart.ch/greeting-the-new-era-in-japan/. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

Fahey, Rob. “The Reiwa Era: Explaining Japan’s New Era Name.” Tokyo Review, 1 April 2021, tokyoreview.net/2019/04/the-reiwa-era-explaining-japans-new-era-name/. Accessed 11 May 2023.

Fujiwara, Gideon, and Peter Nosco. “The Kokugaku (Native Japan Studies) School.” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 16 Nov. 2021, plato.stanford.edu/entries/kokugaku-school/. Accessed 12 May 2023.

Furukawa, Takaaki. “Why Are You Happy with Reiwa as Name for Japan’s New Era?” Quora, www.quora.com/Why-are-you-happy-with-Reiwa-as-name-for-Japans-new-era. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

Gerrard, Mike. “Why Are You Happy with Reiwa as Name for Japan’s New Era?” Quora, 2020, www.quora.com/Why-are-you-happy-with-Reiwa-as-name-for-Japans-new-era. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

Ivanov, Ivaylo. “What Do You Think of the New Era Name of Japan?” Quora, www.quora.com/What-do-you-think-of-the-new-era-name-of-Japan. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

Ishigaki, Takao. “Why Are You Happy with Reiwa as Name for Japan’s New Era?” Quora, www.quora.com/Why-are-you-happy-with-Reiwa-as-name-for-Japans-new-era. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

Kajikawa, Nobuyuki. “Manyo seishin” kara 'masurao buri' he – Kentei kyokasho no 'Manyoshu.” Government-Authorized Textbooks and Classical Literature, vol. 67, no 5, 2018, pp. 2-12, www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/nihonbungaku/67/5/67_2/_pdf/-char/en. Accessed 30 June 2023.

Koysiripong, Wasu. “Why Are You Happy with Reiwa as Name for Japan’s New Era?” Quora, www.quora.com/Why-are-you-happy-with-Reiwa-as-name-for-Japans-new-era. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

Laspina, David A. “Why Are You Happy with Reiwa as Name for Japan’s New Era?” Quora, www.quora.com/Why-are-you-happy-with-Reiwa-as-name-for-Japans-new-era. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

McCurry, Justin: “Reiwa: How Japan’s New Era Name is Breaking Tradition.” The Guardian, 1 Apr. 2019, www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/01/reiwa-how-japans-new-era-name-is-breaking-tradition. Accessed 12 May 2023.

Nara, Hiroshi. The Structure of Detachment: The Aesthetic Vision of Kuki Shūzō. U of Hawaii P, 2004.

Pattimore, Roger. “Why Are You Happy with Reiwa as Name for Japan’s New Era?” Quora, www.quora.com/Why-are-you-happy-with-Reiwa-as-name-for-Japans-new-era. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

Rich, Motoko. “Japan’s New Era Gets a Name, but No One Can Agree What It Means.” The New York Times, 1 April 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/04/01/world/asia/japan-emperor-era-reiwa.html. Accessed 12 May 2023.

“‘Rei’ ni ichiban chikai nihongo wa ‘uruwashii.’ ‘Reiwa’ no kōansha ga imi wo kaisetsu [The Closest Japanese Word to ‘Rei’ Is ‘beautiful,’ as Explained by a Scholar of Japanese Literature and The

Name`s Creator].” The Daily Shincho, 1 June 2019, www.dailyshincho.jp/article/2019/06010615/. Accessed 24 May 2023.

“Reiwa.” The Japanese-English Dictionary, 2019, jisho.org/search/%E4%BB%A4%E5%92%8C. Accessed 27 Nov. 2023.

“‘Reiwa,’ Japan’s New Imperial Era Title, Raises Concerns about Authoritarian Connotations.” Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 3 April 2019, www.abc.net.au/news/2019-04-03/new-japanese-imperial-title-of-reiwa-confuses-some/10965194. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

“Reiwa: ‘Nihon no kunigara, shikkari jidai he,’ shushō danwa zenbun [Reiwa: ‘Japan’s National Character Will Be Firmly Transferred To the Next Generation,’ Prime Ministers’ full statement].” Nihon keizai shinbun, 1 April 2019, www.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO43168770R00C19A4000000/?n_cid=DSREA001. Accessed 11 May 2023.

Reuters, Tokyo. “Japan Declares New Imperial Era ‘Reiwa.’” The Daily Star, 2 April 2019, www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/japan-declares-new-imperial-era-reiwa-1723534. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

“Shin gengō “reiwa” shushō danwa `hana o ōkiku sakasetai' [New Era Name ‘Reiwa’ Prime Minister’s Statement ‘I Want the Flowers to Bloom Big’].” Nihon keizai shinbun, 1 April 2019, www.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO43167240R00C19A4000000/. Accessed 11 May 2023.

Shirane, Haruo, and Tomi Suzuki. Inventing the Classics: Modernity, National Identity, and Japanese Literature. Stanford UP, 2000.

Takenaka, Takumi. “Shin gengō ‘Reiwa’ shutten ‘Manyōshū’ to wa [New Era Name ‘Reiwap’: What Do We Know About Its Source ‘Manyoshu’?].” Mainichi Shinbun, 1 April 2019, mainichi.jp/articles/20190401/k00/00m/010/124000c. Accessed 24 May 2023.

Ueno, Makoto, and Hideo Suzuki. “The Manyoshu.” Japanese Wikipedia, 2017, ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%B5%B7%E8%A1%8C%E3%81%8B%E3%81%B0. Accessed 12 May 2023.

Yamashita, Samuel. “Before the Nation: Kokugaku and the Imagining of Community in Early Modern Japan by Susan L. Burns.” The Journal of Japanese Studies, vol. 32, no. 1, winter 2006, pp. 215-220,. UCPRESS, online.ucpress.edu/jjs/article-abstract/32/1/215/202615/Review-Before-the-Nation-Kokugaku-and-the?redirectedFrom=fulltext.

Yokoyama, Yukiko, and Akiko Fukabori. “‘Natsukeoya’ Manyūshu kenkyū Nakanishi Susumu san ni kiku ‘Reiwa’ uruwashiki seishin [‘Manyoshu,’ Expert Susumu Nakanishi Talks on Reiwa’s Beautiful Spirit].” The Sankei Shinbun, 2019, www.sankei.com/article/20190429UKYGZRBMBBOVXD4NDAM2G4FGDI/. Accessed 9 Nov. 2023.

Yoshida, Reiji. “What’s in a Name? Reiwa Reflects Today’s Politics, Japan’s Cultural History and Social Philosophy.” The Japan Times, 2 April 2019, www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/04/02/national/politics-diplomacy/whats-name-reiwa-reflects-todays-politics-japans-cultural-history-social-philosophy/. Accessed 24 May 2023.

Yoshikazu Shinada. “Man'yoshu: The Invention of a National Poetry Anthology.” Inventing the Classics: Modernity, National Identity, and Japanese Literature, edited by Haruo Shirane and Tomi Suzuki, Stanford UP, 2000, pp. 31-51.

Youmans, Claire. “I’m Confused about the Name of the New Japanese Era. Can You Explain It to Me?” Quora, 2020, www.quora.com/Im-confused-about-the-name-of-the-new-Japanese-era-Can-you-explain-it-to-me. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

[1]
「春の訪れを告げ、見事に咲き誇る梅の花のように一人ひとりが明日への希望とともに、それぞれの花を大き

[2]
「幅広い階層の人々が詠んだ歌が収められ、我が国の豊かな国民文化と長い伝統を象徴する国書だ」、「悠久

[3] Wa was the oldest name of Japan attested in ancient Chinese and Korean sources. It was first written with the Chinese character 倭 (wa) meaning “submissive,” “distant,” “dwarf,” and referred to the inhabitants (barbarians) of the Wa kingdoms in the East. The name was used until the eighth century when the Japanese replaced the character with 和 (wa) meaning “harmony,” “peace,” and “balance.” The Chinese character 倭 combines the 人 or 亻 “human, person” radical and a wěi 委 “bend” phonetic. This wěi phonetic element depicts hé 禾 “grain” over nǚ 女 “woman,” which can semantically be analyzed as: “bend down, bent, tortuous, crooked; fall down, throw down, throw away, send away, reject; send out, delegate or – to bend like a 女 woman working with the 禾 grain” (Carr 6). Nara period Japanese scholars believed that the Chinese character 倭 for Japan was graphically pejorative in denoting 委 “bent down” 亻 “people.” Around 757 CE, Japan officially changed its denomination from 倭 (wa) to 和 (wa) “harmony; peace, sum,” i.e., with the Chinese character hé 和 that combines 禾 the “grain” and the “mouth” 口.

[4] Japanese kanji characters often have two readings, Chinese reading or on yomi and Japanese reading or kun yomi. Both readings often also have ulterior readings.

[5] Chinese was a lingua franca in East Asia the same way Latin was in Europe.

[6] plato.stanford.edu/entries/kokugaku-school/#FemaKoku (Accessed 19 May 2025)

[7] Sakimori no uta are poems composed by coast guards (jap. sakimori) conscripted from Togoku. Captains of the sakimori who were conscripted in 755 from each province were commanded to record and submit the poems composed by the guards; among the originally collected poems, 82, or almost half of them, were not included as they were felt to be not skillful enough, and the selected poems were registered with the composers’ names, and the provinces they came from.

[8] The best-known example of this usage is a military song Umi yukaba, taken from a passage composed in the eighth century by a famous Japanese poet, Otomo no Yakamochi. The poem was

an expression of his gratitude towards the emperor, and its opening passage, “Go to the sea,” refers to the Etchu province that bordered the Sea of Japan to the north. In 1937, the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) commissioned Nobutoki Kiyoshi, a lecturer at the Tokyo Music School (currently Tokyo University of Arts), to put the music to the Yakamochi’s song and create Umi Yukaba as part of its campaign for the National Spirit Mobilization Week.9 It was on March 6, 1942, that the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) broadcast this song for the first time after announcing that nine soldiers had died in the attack on Pearl Harbor. After December of the same year, the Imperial Rule Assistance Association designated this song as the “national song,” and after that, it was broadcast every time an announcement was made.

[9]