

Recitation E

From Heisei to Reiwa: A Changing Era in Japan

We are living in Japan at an auspicious time for the country, and not just because of the famed 'sakura' or cherry blossom season that brings such beauty to the Spring landscape. Japan's imperial succession was planned for some time, with the ascendance of Crown Prince Naruhito to the throne on May 1st.

The choice of the new 'era' that this heralded was only announced by a government committee one month earlier, making headlines around the world. From May 1st we entered the era called 'genjo' in Japanese, of Reiwa, with 'rei' meaning auspicious and 'wa' meaning harmony or peace.

We leave behind the previous era, Heisei, which means to achieve peace. Heisei began amid high hopes that Japan would play a greater role in world affairs after its decades of economic growth, noted The Japan Times, but the economy imploded soon afterwards, ushering in a long period of stagnation.

Speaking to people here you gain a sharp and immediate understanding of how deeply they love and respect the Emperor, and his importance to the nation. There is great pride in the office but also in how the era system separates Japan historically from the rest of the world. The new era is the 248th, and Japan has used this system, which began in China, to indicate the year since 645. According to leading newspaper Mainichi Shimbun, 34% of Japanese still use the era system rather than the Western calendar to chart time, though it is in sharp decline. This figure compares to 82% in 1975.

The name of the era is seen as reflective of the times we live in and it has practical implications too: government departments use official stamps and papers with the name of the era, so these, along with coins, are now slowly changing.

(299 words)