

**Ivona Barešová**

✉ [ivona.baresova@upol.cz](mailto:ivona.baresova@upol.cz)

🆔 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4664-013X>

🏠 Palacký University

🌐 Olomouc, Czech Republic

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# **Born in the Reiwa Era: The Reflection of Contemporary Events in Japanese Given Names**

## **Abstract**

The selection, or creation, of a Japanese given name is often an elaborate process inspired by particular ideas about the named individual, the time or circumstances of birth, and aspirations for his or her future life. An important criterion for some parents is to choose a name which is socially appealing and interesting, e.g., evoking a significant current event. One such event immediately reflected in the names of newborns in the twentieth century was the beginning of a new era, when a new emperor ascended the throne. This paper discusses and illustrates on particular examples the influence of the Taishō (1912–1926), Shōwa (1926–1989), and Heisei (1989–2019) eras on subsequent given name selections and more closely analyses the more muted influence of the current Reiwa era, which began on May 1, 2019, after the abdication of Emperor Akihito. It explores the various manifestations of the era change in a sample of names bestowed in 2019 and attempts to explain this recent phenomenon in the context of the major changes in name selection and trends over the last several decades.

## **Keywords**

given names, Japanese, Japanese eras, name selection, Reiwa

## 1. Introduction

“We chose for our daughter, born in 2019, the name *Rei* 零.<sup>1</sup> 雨 [the upper component of the character meaning ‘rain’] will remind us of the evening when she was born and I had to go to the hospital in the pouring rain, and 令 [the lower part] of the beginning of the new Reiwa [令和] era. The character 零 [meaning ‘zero’] expresses our wish for her to start from zero and live her life as she likes because there are infinite possibilities. Being homophonous with 礼 [‘gratitude’], it also expresses our wish for her to become a person who can properly thank others”.

Rei’s mother, 2019, web platform Baby Calendar  
(adapted from Japanese)

Japanese given names are not limited to existing names, but instead are often invented anew for each child. As the above explanation of the name *Rei* 零 illustrates, the logographic kanji (adapted Chinese characters used for writing Japanese) make it possible to convey desired meanings through the graphic form of the name. The name is “tailor-made” for this particular girl, reflecting the circumstances of her birth, expressing particular hopes about the qualities of her character, and a wish for her future life. In addition, some parents make sure the kanji used in the name have an auspicious number of strokes in combination with the surname.

As the example also shows, the choice of a particular name may not only be inspired by personal or private things, but also by significant contemporary events. In fact, choosing a name that evokes a recent event or personality, has traditionally been an important aspect of name selection for some parents. This can be a wedding or birth in the Imperial family, the Olympic Games, or a notable national anniversary, to name a few. For example, many boys and girls born in 1940 were named *Norio* 紀男, 紀雄, 紀夫, and *Noriko* 紀子,<sup>2</sup> respectively, to commemorate the massively celebrated

<sup>1</sup> Japanese is transcribed here using the Hepburn system of romanization, which follows English pronunciation. Long vowels are transcribed using the macron.

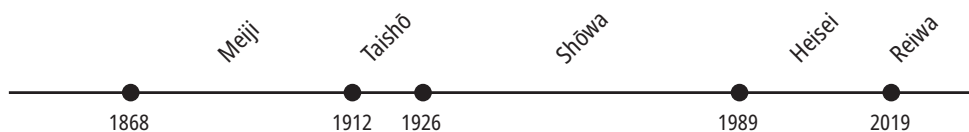
<sup>2</sup> The first character in these names, 紀 (‘chronicle, account, narrative, history, annals’), comes from the Japanese word 紀元 (‘era’) in the name of this event (紀元二千六百年記念行事 [Commemorative ceremony for the 2,600th anniversary of the founding of Japan]).

2,600th anniversary of the mythical founding of the Japanese Empire (Barešová, 2016, p. 44).

Another event immediately reflected in baby names in the twentieth century, an example of the aspect of naming which will be examined, was the beginning of a new era when a new emperor ascended the throne – an event naturally associated with positive expectations for the future.

An era change marks a significant reset of time in Japan. Unlike a decade, an era is long enough to envelop the majority of one's life. Japanese, therefore, tend to recognize their peers by the era in which they were born and grew up (Kobayashi, 2019, p. 51).

In modern practice, since 1868, each era corresponds with the rule of one emperor (see Figure 1). The current era commenced on May 1, 2019, when Emperor Akihito's elder son, Naruhito, ascended the throne as the 126th Emperor of Japan.



**Figure 1. Japanese eras in the modern age**

Source: own work.

This paper discusses the more muted influence of the beginning of the current Reiwa era on subsequent name selections. Based on an analysis of a corpus of names bestowed in 2019 and information concerning their selection (see 3.1 Description of the data), it explores the various manifestations of this long-awaited event. This phenomenon is compared to those of the previous three eras which started in the twentieth century, i.e., Taishō, Shōwa, and Heisei, and explained in the context of the major changes in name selection over the last several decades (e.g., Kobayashi, 2009).

## 2. The reflection of era change in name selection in the twentieth century

### 2.1. The Taishō era (1912–1926)

The influence of the Taishō era on name selection is apparent from the name ranking by Meiji Yasuda Life Insurance Company (see also Kida, 2002, p. 130), which lists the top ten ranking names of babies insured with the company for every year since 1912, i.e., the first year of the Taishō era.<sup>3</sup> As apparent from Table 1, the beginning of the Taishō 大正 era (whose name is interpreted as ‘great righteousness’) is directly reflected in the most popular male names through its second character, 正.

**Table 1. The top ten male and female names in the first years of the Taishō era**

M	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1912	正一	清	正雄	正	茂	武雄	正治	三郎	正夫	一郎
1913	正二	茂	正雄	正	清	三郎	正一	武雄	義雄	正男
1914	正三	清	正雄	三郎	正	正一	勇	実	秀雄	茂
1915	清	三郎	茂	正雄	正	実	武雄	一郎	義雄	正一
F	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1912	千代	ハル	ハナ	正子	文子	ヨシ	千代子	キヨ	静子	はる
1913	正子	千代	静子	キヨ	文子	ヨシ	ハル	フミ	マサ	きみ
1914	静子	キヨ	千代子	ハル	きよ	ヨシ	キミ	トミ	フミ	光子
1915	千代	千代子	文子	静子	キヨ	ハル	清子	きよ	きみ	はる

Source: adapted from Meiji Yasuda, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the name survey is limited to children insured by this company, and thus especially in the first half of the 20th century when health insurance was not as common, the ranking was not completely representative of the whole society.

The most frequent names in the first three years, *Shōichi*<sup>4</sup> 正一 (正 + ‘one’), *Shōji* 正二 (正 + ‘two’), and *Shōzō* 正三 (正 + ‘three’), can be interpreted as ‘born in the first, second or third year of the Taishō era’, respectively. Although other interpretations of these three particular names are possible and more common – for example, 正 means ‘righteous’, and characters denoting numbers in male names frequently refer to birth order – the increased occurrence of these particular names in these particular years can be safely attributed to the influence of the new era. Another obvious example of the new era’s influence is the given name *Masamoto* 正元 (正 + ‘beginning’) bestowed upon the Japanese historian Kitajima Masamoto, who was born only a week after the commencement of the new era. The meaning of the characters can be interpreted as ‘the beginning of the Taishō era’.

In the previous period, it was common to give names expressing Confucian virtues and other moral values. The character 正 was used in names at that time, referring to a righteous person, and the beginning of the new era enhanced its popularity even further. It only disappeared from the top ten ranking names by Meiji Yasuda with the start of the subsequent Shōwa era (see Table 2). The other top-ranking names featuring this character listed in Table 1 include: the single-character name *Tadashi* 正, and two-character names 正雄 (正 + ‘man, manly, brave’), 正夫 (正 + ‘man, husband’), and 正男 (正 + ‘man, young man, son’), all three usually read as *Masao*,<sup>5</sup> and also *Masaharu* 正治 (正 + ‘reign, be at peace, cure’). The most popular female names feature the name *Masako* 正子, consisting of a character from the name of the era and the end character 子 (‘child, girl’), which quickly started gaining popularity as an end character of female names at the beginning of the twentieth century (Barešová, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> As a result of historical development (see, e.g., Coulmas, 1989), each kanji usually has multiple readings (and meanings), including special readings used only in proper names. The graphic form of a name thus frequently has more than only one possible reading. The character 正 has Sino-Japanese readings /sei/ and /shō/ and Japanese readings /tada/ and /masa/. The character 一 also has more than one reading. This particular name, 正一, can be read, in addition to *Shōichi*, also *Masakazu*, *Seiichi*, and *Masaichi*. All names in this section are listed only with the most common reading.

<sup>5</sup> According to ranking by another insurance company, Dai’ichi Life, which provides the top five most popular names by reading, the name *Masao*, written in these several kanji combinations, was actually the most frequent name by reading in 1912 (Dai’ichi seimei kōhōbu, 1987, pp. 159, 240).

The first character from the name of the era, 大 ('big, great'), did not show up among top-ranking names, but its increased occurrence in male names in the first years of the era, which is obvious with a simple search of Japanese people listed in Wikipedia, might have been influenced by this event. The fact that the Japanese navy officer Yamaoka Daiji was named *Daiji* 大二 (大 + 'two') is likely to be related to the fact that he was born as a second son in the second year of the new Taishō era.

## 2.2. The Shōwa era (1926–1989)

The beginning of the Shōwa 昭和 era (interpreted as 'enlightened peace, harmony') had a similar impact on name selection. However, since it started only a few days before the end of the year 1926, on the 25th of December, its influence in the Meiji Yasuda ranking is only apparent the following year, 1927.

**Table 2. The top ten male and female names at the end of the Taishō era and the beginning of the Shōwa era**

M	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1925	清	茂	勇	三郎	博	実	弘	正	一郎	進
1926	清	勇	博	実	茂	三郎	弘	正	進	一男
1927	昭二	昭	和夫	清	昭一	博	勇	茂	実	弘
1928	昭三	茂	昭	清	勇	辰雄	博	弘	三郎	和夫
F	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1925	幸子	文子	美代子	久子	芳子	愛子	信子	和子	千代子	八重子
1926	久子	幸子	美代子	照子	文子	和子	信子	千代子	光子	貞子
1927	和子	昭子	久子	照子	幸子	美代子	光子	文子	信子	節子
1928	和子	節子	幸子	久子	昭子	美代子	照子	典子	文子	信子

Source: adapted from Meiji Yasuda, 2021.

The first character from its name, 昭 ('shining, bright'), had not been used much in names before, and thus it provided a fresh image and immediately gained popularity. In addition to *Shōji* 昭二 (昭 + 'two') in the second year of the era, and *Shōzō* 昭三 (昭 + 'three') in the third year, the top-ranking names

include *Shōichi* 昭一 (昭 + ‘one’), probably referring to the era and to being firstborn, and *Akira* 昭. The second character, 和, has a number of appealing meanings, including ‘Japan, Japanese style’, ‘peace’, ‘calm and gentle’, and also ‘harmony’, which is one of the key Japanese cultural values. The most frequent name containing this character was *Kazuo* 和夫 (和 + ‘man, husband’).

The most popular female names reflecting the era, *Kazuko* 和子 and *Akiko* 昭子, combine a character from the name of the era with 子, the popularity of which increased even more. For most of the Shōwa era (until 1985), all top ten female names in the Meiji Yasuda ranking contain 子. While the name *Akiko* written with the character from the name of the new era increased in occurrence only at the beginning of the new era, *Kazuko* 和子 was popular already in the previous period. The beginning of the new era boosted its popularity, which then lasted throughout the Second World War till the 1950s, expressing a desire for peace and harmony.

### 2.3. The Heisei era (1989–2019)

The influence of the Heisei 平成 era (interpreted as ‘achieving peace’), which started in January 1989, is not as apparent in the Meiji Yasuda ranking as the influence of the previous two eras. Only the name *Shōhei* 翔平, featuring the first character from the name of the era, 平, in combination with the popular character 翔 meaning ‘to soar, fly’ landed among the top ten male names. Although 平 is one of the traditional end characters in male names, its leap from the 52nd position of the previous year may be attributed to the new era (Meiji Yasuda, 2021). The top ten female names include *Narumi* 成美 (成 + ‘beauty’), featuring the second character from the era’s name, 成, in combination with the popular end character 美.

The top ten male names in 1989 listed in the online name database Heisei namae jiten (n.d.) [Dictionary of Heisei era names] also contain only *Shōhei* 翔平, and the top one hundred names include an additional 13 names composed of either 平 or 成.<sup>6</sup> One of them, *Kazunari* 和成, combines a character from the Shōwa era and a character from the Heisei era. In this database,

<sup>6</sup> *Junpei* 純平 (‘pure, genuine, innocent’ + 平), *Kōhei* 康平 (‘ease, peace’ + 平), *Kōhei* 浩平 (‘broad, abundance, vigorous’ + 平), *Kyōhei* 恭平 (‘respectful’ + 平), *Ryōhei* 良平 (‘good, pleasing’ + 平), *Ryōhei* 亮平 (‘clear, help’ + 平), *Shōhei* 祥平 (‘auspicious’ + 平), *Shūhei* 修平 (‘discipline, study, master’ + 平), *Shūhei* 周平 (‘fine, attentive, thorough’ + 平), *Yōhei* 洋平 (‘ocean, sea, Western



*Narumi* 成美 is ranked 7th among female names and is the only name containing a character from the name of the Heisei era among the top hundred. The beginning of the new era did not necessarily have to be the main factor in the selection of these particular names but might have positively influenced particular choices.

On the other hand, inspiration from the commencing era is quite apparent in the name *Seiichi* 成一 (成 + ‘one’) of the former professional baseball player Ōhira Seiichi 大平 成一, born in 1989. The last character of his family name and the characters of his given name form 平成一 [Heisei 1], i.e., the first year of the Heisei era.

**Table 3. The top ten male and female names at the end of the Shōwa era and the beginning of the Heisei era**

M	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1988	翔太	達也	拓也	大輔	健太	和也	亮	竜也	翔	大樹
1989	翔太	拓也	健太	翔	達也	雄太	翔平	大樹	亮	健太郎
1990	翔太	拓也	健太	大樹	亮	駿	雄太	達也	翔平	大輔
1991	翔太	拓也	健太	翔	大樹	翔平	大輔	直樹	達也	雄太
F	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1988	愛	彩	美穂	麻衣	沙織	舞	麻美	愛美	恵	香織
1989	愛	彩	美穂	成美	沙織	麻衣	舞	愛美	瞳	彩香
1990	愛, 彩	— <sup>7</sup>	愛美	千尋	麻衣	舞	美穂	瞳	彩香, 沙織	—
1991	美咲	愛	美穂	彩	麻衣	彩香	舞	愛美	早紀	千尋

Source: adapted from Meiji Yasuda, 2021.

style’ + 平), *Yōhei* 陽平 (‘sun’ + 平), and *Kazunari* 一成 (‘one’ + 成), *Kazunari* 和成 (‘harmony, peace, calm and gentle’ + 成).

<sup>7</sup> When several names have the same number of occurrences (in this case 愛 and 彩 placed 1–2), they are listed together and the next position or positions are left empty.

### 3. The reflection of the current Reiwa era in name selection (2019–present)

The ranking by Meiji Yasuda displays no direct influence of the beginning of the new Reiwa 令和 era. The popularity of the male name *Yamato* 大和 (ranked 9th in 2020, see Table 4), containing the second character from the era's name, is not likely related to the event because it ranked high in the previous years as well, although in some cases the choice of this particular name was surely motivated by the new era (see 3.2 part 4, 'The use of 和'). Furthermore, none of the top one hundred names contained the first character from the name of the era. Meiji Yasuda's summary of the situation concludes that the practice of reflecting the beginning of a new era in the name has almost disappeared (Meiji Yasuda, 2021).

**Table 4. The top ten male and female names at the end of the Heisei era and the beginning of the Reiwa era**

M	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
2018	蓮	湊	大翔	大和	陽翔	悠真	樹	陽太	陽翔	悠真
2019	蓮	陽翔, 新	–	湊, 蒼, 律	–	–	樹	大翔, 悠真	–	朝陽
2020	蒼	樹, 蓮	–	陽翔	律	朝陽	湊	新	大和	大翔
F	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
2018	結月	結愛	結菜	杏	さくら, 凜	–	芽依, 葵	–	紬	莉子, 陽菜, 美月
2019	凜	陽葵	結愛, 杏	–	紬	莉子	結月	芽依, 美月, 心春	–	–
2020	陽葵	凜	詩	結菜	結愛	莉子	結月	紬, 瀨	–	結衣

Source: adapted from Meiji Yasuda, 2021.

### 3.1. Description of the data

In order to gain a closer perspective on the situation, I examined the names of 1,665 children (820 boys and 845 girls) born in 2019, collected from the website Baby Calendar. This social platform encourages parents to share the names of their babies and their name selection stories (*nazuke episōdo* in Japanese), which usually include information concerning their motivation and the main criteria for selecting each particular name, and their interpretation of its meaning. The survey includes names collected between January 1 and October 1, i.e., from five months before and five months after the beginning of the new era. It was not, however, possible with all the names to determine whether their bearers were born before or after the start of the new era in May. Furthermore, some parents might have been influenced by the start of the new era but have left it unmentioned or might not have realized its influence. Therefore, only descriptions specifically stating that the name choice was motivated by the era's change were further examined.

### 3.2. Ways to reflect the new era in names

Fifty-five name selection stories explicitly mentioned the beginning of the new Reiwa era and seven mentioned the end of the Heisei era as one of the aspects considered during name selection and revealed also less explicit manifestations of the era's influence. The event is reflected in the names in several ways:

#### 1) The use of 令

The most straightforward way is the use of the first character from the era's name, 令. This kanji is usually used in modern Japanese with the meaning of 'command', or 'order', which is not an appealing meaning to be used in names, but, based on its meaning 'good' (Shin gengō, 2019) used in old Japanese, the name of the era is officially interpreted as 'beautiful harmony' (Reiwa, 2019). 令 appeared only in two male names in the corpus, *Haruma* 令眞 (令 + 'upright, honest'), and *Ryōta* 令大 (令 + 'big, great'), and five female names (four related to the era), *Amiri* 葵美令 ('hollyhock, sunflower' + 'beauty' + 令), *Haruna* 令奈

(令 + ‘Nara’<sup>8</sup>), *Rea* 令彩 (令 + ‘colourful’), and *Reika* 令栞 (令 + ‘bookmark’). The website Baby Calendar lists the following additional names of 230 babies containing 令, recorded via other services it provides.

Boys’ names: *Akaru* 明令 (‘bright, cheerful’ + 令), *Haruma* 令稀 (令 + ‘rare’), *Haruto* 令透 (令 + ‘clear, transparent’), *Haruto* 令橙 (令 + ‘orange (Citrus aurantium)’), *Kōryō* 黄令 (‘yellow’ + 令), *Rei* 令, *Reiga* 令雅 (令 + ‘elegant, refined’), *Reito* 令翔 (令 + ‘to fly, soar’), *Reito* 令人 (令 + ‘person’), *Reo* 令隆 (令 + ‘high, noble, prosperity’), *Reon* 令音 (令 + ‘sound’), *Ryō* 令, *Ryōji* 令治 (令 + ‘reign, be at peace, cure’), *Ryōsuke* 令涼 (令 + ‘refreshing’), *Ryōta* 令汰 (令 + ‘to wash off, select, luxury’), and *Zenrei* 全令 (‘whole, complete’ + 令).

Girls’ names: *Haruko* 令子 (令 + ‘child, girl’), *Rea* 令愛 (令 + ‘love’), *Rei* 令, *Reia* 令彩 (令 + ‘colourful’), *Reika* 令香 (令 + ‘fragrance’), *Reiko* 令子 (令 + ‘child, girl’), *Reina* 令菜, (令 + ‘rapeseed’), *Reira* 令蘭 (令 + ‘orchid’), *Rema* 令真 (令 + ‘upright, honest’), *Rena* 令奈 (令 + ‘Nara’), and *Reona* 令央奈 (令 + ‘centre, middle’ + ‘Nara’).

## 2) The use of a character containing 令 as its component

A number of parents who reflected the new era in the name chose a character that contains 令 as its component: 鈴 (‘small bell’) in the names *Rin* 鈴, *Suzu* 鈴 (2x), *Suzuna* 鈴菜 (鈴 + ‘rapeseed’), and *Suzune* 鈴音 (鈴 + ‘sound’); 怜 (‘wise’) in *Rei* 怜, *Reina* 怜奈 (怜 + ‘Nara’), *Reina* 怜風 (怜 + ‘calm (at sea), lull’), *Remi* 怜実 (怜 + ‘crop, harvest’), *Rena* 怜菜 (怜 + ‘rapeseed’), *Rena* 怜那 (那 + ‘beautiful’), and *Reno* 怜乃 (怜 + particle, ‘I, myself’); 玲 (‘tinkling of jade’) in *Reiri* 玲李 (玲 + ‘Japanese plum’), and *Reni* 玲仁 (玲 + ‘humane, benevolent’); 濤 (‘waterway’) in *Mio* 濤 (2x); and 零 (‘zero’) in *Rei* 零. This method makes it possible to relate the name to this event in a less obvious manner and to combine more aspects in the name, as illustrated on the example of *Rei* 零 in the Introduction.

<sup>8</sup> The character 奈, used in *Nara* 奈良 (city), is used in female names primarily for its reading /na/.

### 3) Association with the era through its initial syllable /rei/

Some parents were primarily inspired by the sound – the initial syllable of the era’s name, /rei/ or just /re/: male names *Rei* 怜, *Reo* 怜央 (怜 + ‘centre, middle’), *Reo* 玲於 (玲 + ‘in, at’), and female names *Rei* れい, *Rei* 麗生 (‘beautiful’ + ‘life’), *Reina* 鈴菜 (鈴 + ‘rapeseed’). These names are mostly written with one of the characters listed in Point 2; the female name *Rei* れい is written in the hiragana syllabary, and *Rei* 麗生 utilizes a character more readily associated with the meaning ‘beautiful’ than 令 from the name of the era.

### 4) The use of 和

Unlike 令, the second character from the era’s name, 和, has been more frequently used in names (e.g., see the name *Yamato* 大和 in Table 4). The corpus contained 36 names with this character. Eleven parents stated that their choice was motivated by this important event.

Boys’ names: *Kaname* 和盟 (和 + ‘swear’), *Kazuya* 和弥 (和 + ‘for a long time, forever’), *Soa* 奏和 (‘to play an instrument, accomplish’ + 和), *Towa* 透和 (‘clear, transparent’ + 和), and *Yamato* 大和 (‘big, great’ + 和).

Girls’ names: *Hiyori* 陽和梨 (‘sun’ + 和 + ‘pear’), *Kazuha* 和葉 (和 + ‘leaf’), *Nanaha* 和々羽 (和 + iteration mark + ‘feather’), *Waka* 和花 (和 + ‘flower’), *Wako* 和心 (和 + ‘heart’), and *Yūna* 優和 (‘kind’ + 和).

### 5) The new era as a ‘beginning’

Several names in the examined sample commemorate the beginning of the era through a character which stands for ‘beginning’, such as 元, in the male names *Gen* 元 and *Motoharu* 元悠 (元 + ‘everlasting, calm, at ease’), or a character related to, or associated with ‘beginning’, for example, 一 (‘one’) in the male names *Ibuki* 一颯 (一 + ‘sound of the wind’) and *Taichi* 泰一 (‘peaceful, calm’ + 一), or 新 (‘new’) in *Arata*, written as 新 or 新汰 (新 + ‘to wash off, select, luxury’). The character 暁 (‘daybreak, dawn’) forming the male name *Kyō* 暁 expresses the beginning of the new era through an association with the beginning of a new day.

Some of the associations cannot be guessed unless properly explained by the name givers. For example, a girl born shortly after the new era started received the name *Meisa* 芽彩, and the first character, which stands for ‘bud’, is meant to represent the “new life that sprouted in the new era” (Meisa’s mother, 2019, Baby Calendar, transl. from Japanese).

## 6) References to Manyōshū

Traditionally, characters for the name of a new era were selected from ancient Chinese texts, but this time they were taken from Manyōshū (万葉集), a collection of Japanese classical poetry (Shin gengō, 2019). Manyōshū thus became another source of inspiration for name selection. For example, the female names *Amaha* 天葉 (‘heavens, sky’ + ‘leaf’), and *Kazuha* 万葉 (‘ten thousand’ + ‘leaf’) refer to Manyōshū through the character 葉 or characters 万葉, respectively, creating an indirect connection with the new era. The name *Kaoru* 郁 is related to Manyōshū through its meaning ‘fragrance’, which appears in its poems, and this makes it, according to the boy’s mother (Baby Calendar, 2019), a good name for the new Reiwa era.

## 7) Inspiration from the end of the Heisei era

Some names bestowed in the first months of 2019 reflect the end of the Heisei era. In seven cases it was explicitly mentioned that the name was inspired by the close of the era. The male names *Saneyoshi* 平祥 (平 + ‘auspicious, happiness, good fortune’), and *Shinpei* 慎平 (‘careful, prudent’ + 平) contain 平 from the name of the era; the male names *Naruto* 成叶 (成 + ‘to come true’), *Shōtarō* 成太郎 (成 + ‘first born’), *Yūsei* 悠成 (‘everlasting, calm, at ease’ + 成), and the female name *Haruna* 春成 (‘spring’ + 成) feature 成. The male name *Kōsei* 昊晟 (‘sky’ + ‘clear’) refers to the end of the era through the component 成 in the second character, 晟.

## 4. Discussion

The beginnings of the first two eras, Taishō and Shōwa, were directly reflected in the most popular names of that time, whereas the influence of the Heisei and especially the Reiwa era is much less apparent. One of the manifold reasons can be found in changing naming practices. The most frequent names reflecting the beginning of the Taishō or Shōwa era (listed in Table 1 and 2) follow one of several simple name patterns that were popular at that time. In the first half of the twentieth century, it was common to start the selection of a name by choosing a kanji which the name givers wished to have in the name. In the Taishō era, this was true especially for boys as many girls still received simple two-mora names written in one of the two syllabaries, such as *Haru* ハル/はる ('spring'), and *Hana* ハナ ('flower') (listed in Table 1).

The chosen kanji itself could form a male name (as the name *Tadashi* 正 formed by a character from the name of the Taishō era, and *Akira* 昭 reflecting the Shōwa era), or was complemented by another suitable character, usually a gender-specific end character. The most popular end characters in male names included characters with the meaning 'man' (esp. 夫, 男, and 雄), and characters denoting numbers (一, 二, 三, etc.). The majority of male names reflecting either of the two eras listed by Meiji Yasuda follow one of these two patterns: 正雄, 正夫, 正男 (all read *Masao*), and *Kazuo* 和夫 are of the former type, and *Shōichi* 正一/昭一, *Shōji* 正二/昭二, and *Shōzō* 正三/昭三 of the latter. By far the most popular end character in female names was 子 (see 2.1 and 2.2), and thus it is quite natural that the most frequent names reflecting either of the two eras are *Masako* 正子, *Akiko* 昭子, and *Kazuko* 和子. The combination of an appealing character from the name of the era and a popular name pattern is what made these particular names so frequent at that time. The smaller variety of female names directly reflecting either of the two eras among the most popular names can be at least partially attributed to the dominance of the 子 names at that time.

The more muted reflection of the Heisei and especially the Reiwa era needs to be seen in the light of the changes in name selection which started to be apparent towards the end of the Shōwa era. A significant drop in the number of children per family, and a gradual change in life values led to placing more emphasis on individual qualities and the uniqueness of each child,

which can also be observed in name selection (Kobayashi, 2009). This development was strongly enhanced by an increasing number of maternity magazines and baby names books (e.g., the influential Tamahiyo publications), regularly reporting on fashion trends, and even setting them, and at the same time creating pressure on parents to choose a name which is perfect in every aspect. Under this influence a growing number of parents started thinking about the name well before the birth and especially from the perspective of addressing the child rather than from the perspective of the child's future social roles (Kobayashi, 2009, p. 18), i.e., placing more emphasis on the sound than the graphic form (e.g., Tsuruta, 2003).

This gradual shift from name selection based on the meaning of or preference for some particular kanji to selection based primarily on the sound and subsequent assignment of kanji, combined with a growing emphasis on individuality, gave rise to new names greatly diverse in structure and sound (Barešová, 2016, pp. 59–62). Rather than characters denoting particular qualities and aspirations, or directly expressing desired meanings, characters related to the natural world are now widely used to create a pleasant image while conveying the desired qualities and aspirations indirectly, through various associations and allusions (see, e.g., Honda, 2005; Makino, 2012; Barešová, 2015; 2016).

Returning to the example of the increased short-term popularity of the names *Noriko* and *Norio* in 1940 mentioned in the Introduction, the name pattern ○子<sup>9</sup> reached its peak popularity in the 1940s and was by far the most frequent type of female names (Sakuma, 1969, p. 98) and thus the name *Noriko* combining the character 紀 from the name of the event with 子 even placed first in the Meiji Yasuda ranking that particular year. The name *Norio*, although of a similar pattern, did not appear among the top-ranking names because /o/ was written with three different end characters with similar meanings, 夫, 男, and 雄, and there was also a variety of other popular male end characters with which 紀 was combined.

Nowadays, even when a particular kanji becomes extremely popular, the great variety of possible multi-kanji combinations usually precludes any particular combination from rising among the top-ranking names unless popularized by the media. Therefore, many of the top-ranking names are names of

<sup>9</sup> ○ stands for any desired character.



popular personalities, such as celebrities from TV shows, and fictional characters from manga, anime, etc.

Furthermore, the current naming practices, combined with the emphasis on original names expressing the child's individuality, prevent many parents from a direct reflection of the era. In fact, some parents openly stated that they wanted to avoid its explicit or too straightforward expression because they considered it unimaginative.

## 5. Conclusion

Contemporary events have traditionally been a popular source of inspiration for name selection. The recent change of era – from Heisei to Reiwa – is less evident in current names than previous era changes, but a closer analysis showed that some name givers consciously reflected the event in the name of their child or at least considered it. Some names bestowed in 2019 clearly reflect the era's change and the explanations of the parents revealed less explicit manifestations of its influence.

Nowadays it is usually the sound that is considered first and then the kanji are selected, often for the image they create rather than for their denotative meaning. Kanji denoting the natural world have enjoyed wide popularity in the last three decades as many of them are a rich source of associations with human appearances and character, and can also easily relate to the season of the child's birth or some other important event in the parents' relationship. The analysis revealed that commemorating the child's birth by relating it to a significant contemporary event is an important aspect of name selection for some parents and is one of the criteria that must be fulfilled to satisfy their need for a well-thought-of name. For some others, it served as a welcome initial inspiration in the difficult name selection process.

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