

Reiwa—the dawn of an era

In Japan, a new era is born whenever an incoming emperor ascends the Chrysanthemum Throne. The Reiwa era began in May 2019, but the roots of its name are linked to the famous plum blossom party depicted in the diorama. Thirty-two poems composed at the party, along with a descriptive preface, appear in the *Man'yōshū*—the oldest extant collection of classical Japanese poetry. The two kanji characters that make up the era name, “Rei” and “Wa,” are taken from the preface. The meaning of the second character, “wa,” is unambiguous: “tranquility” or “harmony.” The first character, “rei,” typically means “command” or “order” in modern Japanese, but in the *Man'yōshū* passage in question, it means “beautiful,” “fine,” or perhaps “auspicious.” The poem begins as follows:

It was the fine (*rei*) month of the advent of spring
The air was clear and gentle (*wa*) breezes were blowing....

Arguably, this passage seeks to capture the buoyant mood of not just the flowering of the plum trees but contemporary society as the author sees it. It is perhaps significant that the verses were written in Dazaifu, an area known for welcoming foreign cultures. In this sense, the nuance behind the characters for Reiwa offers a positive take on Japanese society and the future, hinting at an ethos of optimism, strong international relations, globalization, and appreciation for different cultures.