

Heisei Becomes History: Critical Reflections on a Period and Periodization

2019



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Short Statement of the Goals and Purposes

Akihito's abdication on April 30th, 2019 brought the imperial reign era of Heisei to an end after 30 years through his own volition rather than his physical passing. This act of choosing to end one's reign was unprecedented in the history of modern Japan and marked a clear separation of the individual person of the emperor from the institution he served. This splitting that the abdication symbolized was characteristic of his reign in a number of different ways. On the one hand, the public actions and words of the Heisei emperor (and the empress) in excess of obligations that his position constitutionally demanded, such as visits to areas afflicted by natural disasters within the nation, or to former battle sites in the Pacific, allowed the public to perceive his distinct personality and even individual determination. On the other hand, in response to globalization and especially digitization, the relevance of imperial nengō as a distinctly "Japanese" time-marking system has been reduced drastically in the past two decades, evidenced, for instance, by the government's recent decision to stop using the reign year as the "master" dating system to input data into its computer system.

This collaborative research unit seeks to reflect on the ambivalent status and fluctuating associations that have clustered around the imperial reign name Heisei, and to consider the use of the reign name year-counting system more generally in the twentieth-first century. To what extent is it useful to enframe the past three decades of Japan as "Heisei"? What kinds of subjects and perspectives would that enframing bring out to visibility (or conceal)? While a number of issues have already been identified and discussed as characteristic of contemporary Japan, it remains to be examined how and to what extent our understanding of such tendencies, phenomena, and experiences may be heightened (or obscured), if approached in conscious relation to the idea of Heisei. It is not self-evident what the collective imaginary of the Heisei era designation will be. Just as we have witnessed in recent years a sharp shift in the public imagination of "Shōwa" from a warning/scar from the recent "dark" past (i.e., the Asia-Pacific War) to an object of nostalgia in idealizing the "bright" times of postwar national prosperity, the collective imagination of "Heisei" will inevitably be fluid and will emerge from its perceived distinction from how the new "Reiwa" era will be defined.



Emperor Akihito wore the sokutai at the Ceremony of the Enthronement (November, 1990)

Since all those who research and teach about Japan (or live in Japan) are implicated in the use of *gengō* and *nengō*, whether one is conscious or not, the end of “Heisei” (and the start of “Reiwa”) provides us with a unique and timely opportunity to come together on a common topic and to engage in multi- and inter-disciplinary discussions across the humanities and the social sciences. Critical reflections will come from a wide range of disciplines including history, art history, literature, religion, anthropology, and political science.

Description of Concrete Proposed Activities and Expected Research Outcomes

During the academic year of 2019, we organized two public lectures during the spring semester. Our first event was a lecture by Prof. Jennifer Robertson (University of Michigan) entitled “Gendering AI and Robots: Robo-Sexism in Japan and the United States.” On June 26, we hosted a lecture by Prof. Ran Zwigenberg (Pennsylvania State University) entitled “The Pericles of Tokushima: the Heisei Castle Boom and the Long Trajectory of Castles in Modern Japan.” In autumn 2019, we organized a lecture by Prof. Patrick W. Galbraith (Senshu University) entitled “Akihabara and the Visual Culture of “Otaku:” Media Booms and “Moe” in the Heisei Period”.

As for proposed activities for Academic Year 2020, we will focus on completing and collecting individual chapter manuscripts for the edited volume, to be submitted at the end of summer 2020. The scheduled date of the volume publication will be in Academic Year 2021, but the complete book manuscript should be in the final stage of editing by the end of Academic Year 2020. We will also continue to organize a few invited lectures that will benefit both the general academic community as well as the more focused research interests of the ICC members.



2011 FIFA Women's World Cup winning trophy and winning team Japan
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Plans for Presentation of Findings

The goal of this collaborative research project since its inception has been to publish an edited volume on the topic. The upcoming academic year of 2020 will be the critical year as we prepare for the edited volume Murai will co-edit with Jeff Kingston (Temple University Japan Campus). Individual chapters will be collected during the second half of the calendar year 2020, with the projected publication date in the summer of 2021.

Relationship to Ongoing Projects

As stated above, this project overlaps with an ongoing publication project with Routledge.

Prime Minister Images:

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan receives a military Guard of Honour in London, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, CC BY 2.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

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Tsutomu Hata: 内閣官房内閣広報室, CC BY 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>>, ウィキメディア・コモンズ経由で

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Ryutaro Hashimoto: The Honorable Paul Wolfowitz (left), U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense, poses for a photograph with former Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto, during his visit at the Pentagon, Washington, D.C., on Oct. 16, 2002. OSD Package No. A07D-00667 (DOD Photo by Robert D. Ward) (Released) via Wikimedia

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ST PETERSBURG. Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori visiting the State Hermitage Museum. 2000/4/29, Kremlin.ru, CC BY 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

Junichiro Koizumi, Junichiro Koizumi arriving at the G8 summit in Sea Island, GA, US, June 2004. From Wikimedia Commons

Yasuo Fukuda, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda at the Kantei on February 27, 2008. State Dept., Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Taro Aso (with President Barack Obama)

White House (Pete Souza), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Yukio Hatoyama: Yukio Hatoyama, Prime Minister of Japan, and Miyuki Hatoyama met Barack Obama, President of the United States, and Michelle Obama at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City on 23 September 2009.

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Naoto Kan: Japan's Prime Minister Naoto Kan is briefed about the state of Ishanomaki High School by Japanese Ground Self Defense Force Lt. Gen. Yuji Kuno, the Comander of the 6th Division, JGSDF, at Ishanomaki City's high school (uploader's note; Ishinomaki Commercial High School, 宮城県石巻商業高等学校), [1] April 10. DVIDSHUB, CC BY 2.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

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Shinzo Abe with Tedros Adhanom (2017): 首相官邸ホームページ, CC BY 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons