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## **Dialectical & Beautiful Harmony. A Sexuality-based Interpretation of *Reiwa* 令和**

### Abstract

*Reiwa*, the name of the new Japanese era, is interpreted as a harmony of three perspectives, which have in common various aesthetical functions of sexuality. In section 1, the historical context of the formulation of the name is presented as an encounter of poetry and sexualized cosmogony. Section 2 offers systematic insights into the symbolic effects of sexuality as unity of elements from Shintoism & Taoism. Finally, the discussion of a dialectical perspective contributes in shaping a new interpretation of *Reiwa*, resting upon sexuality as an experience of creative and beautiful harmony.

### Keywords

*Reiwa*, Sexuality, Harmony, Creativity, Dialectics

Everything is art. Everything is politics.

Ai Weiwei<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

The naming of a new era in Japan as a declaration is a major historical event with far reaching political and cultural impacts. The ritual of this declaration of the *nengō* 年号, the Japanese era's name, is the culmination of a selection

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<sup>1</sup> The Chinese artist uses this motto as the leitmotif of his largest exhibition in Europe to date (Germany, from May 18 to September 1, 2019).

process, which has a long tradition.<sup>2</sup> “Era appellations (like “Genroku” 1688–1704 [or “Shōwa” 1929–1989]) were selected by scholars and astrologers who searched for auspicious two-character phrases in the Chinese classics. [...]. The *nenō* were considered to have important consequences for fortune and success, and usually required extensive negotiation” (Jansen, 2000, 99). The meaning expressed by the era-name did not only carry internal and external messages from political authorities, it was also a manifestation of the corresponding Japanese *Zeitgeist*, in all of its civilizational dimensions. Therefore, the focus on the actual era-name and its different interpretations could offer helpful insights towards a better understanding of contemporary Japanese self-interpretation. On May Day, 2019, a new era began in Japan with the accession of emperor Naruhito, the successor of the emperor Akihito, whose abdication, after 30 years, marked the end of the Heisei-Era. A nine-member expert panel selected the name of the new era, *Reiwa* 令和, which was announced one month earlier by the Japanese government. There were several interpretations of the meaning of *Reiwa*, as well as various reactions to its selection as the official name of the new era. This is related to the different meanings of the parts composing the name and to the fact that it is taken, for the first time, from a Japanese source and not from the Chinese tradition. In fact, the word *Reiwa* is composed of *Rei* 令 and *wa* 和: *Rei* means “beautiful” and “good” but can also mean “order” or “command.” *Wa* is usually translated as “peace” or “harmony.” These two components are extracted from the *Man'yōshū* 万葉集, an eighth-century anthology of poetry from the Nara period 奈良時代, 710–794 C.E. The lines mentioning the selected words are the following:

In this auspicious [*Rei*] month of early spring  
 The weather is fine and the wind gentle [*wa*],  
 The plum blossom open like powder before a mirror  
 While the orchids give off the sweet scent of a sachet.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ruoff (2001, 20): “The era-name system (*issei ichigensei*) was borrowed from China, where beginning in the Ming dynasty a system of one emperor, one reign name was employed. This system was reformed in 1868, as the Japanese government issued an edict requiring that years be counted according to imperial reigns. In 1872, Japan adopted the Western solar calendar, also referred to as the Gregorian calendar. Rather than adopting the practice of dating years according to the Christian era, however, the Japanese dated them according to the reigns of emperors. This was one of many efforts by the Japanese to maintain a distinct identity even if Japan borrowed heavily from the West.”

<sup>3</sup> This is the “provisional translation” mentioned within the statement by Prime Minister Abe, on April 1, 2019. ([https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98\\_abe/statement/201904/\\_00001](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/201904/_00001)).

One could identify two groups of interpretations of the historical decision. (i) The first, generally accepted, refers to the widespread positive understanding of *Reiwa* as beautiful harmony or good togetherness. (ii) The second is a critical attitude associating *Rei* with some authoritarian behavior, which could be easily connected to some conceptions of Japanese nationalism, implicitly evoked by the return to the local ancient sources. On the one hand, this distinction between an official and a critical interpretation of *Reiwa* is closely related to the distinction between the views of the actual Japanese government of Shinzō Abe, the longest-serving Prime Minister in Japanese history, and his party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and on the other, the critical voices warning against the nationalist and authoritarian orientations of that leadership.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the two dominant readings of *Reiwa*, namely the official and the critical, could correspond to two attitudes towards the policies of the actual Japanese government: the first is the attitude of the government itself as well as its supporters and the second is the attitude of the *opposition*. In fact, at first sight, these two interpretations seem to present two opposite views: the official reading expresses a positive and optimistic attitude and the critical reading refers to negative and pessimistic expectations. Nevertheless, the very conception of harmony suggests the possibility of a unified new interpretation, which is a kind of reconciliation with the opposite views. I suggest to call this third way—which is an alternative reading of *Reiwa*, not reducible to any of the above mentioned opposite readings—the *dialectical perspective*, since it rests upon the fundamental character of dialectical thinking, whereby the term “dialectics” is understood in the broad sense as *the unity of the opposites*.<sup>5</sup>

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html). In book V of the *Man'yōshū*, we find the selected lines within poem 815, which includes a Chinese introduction and 32 *uta*'s on plum-blossoms, with the following translation: “(2) The time was the beginning of spring and a good month, the weather was favorable and the wind mild. The plumblossoms unfolded a beauty like the powdered [face of a lovely girl] before the looking-glass; the orchids were fragrant like the little scent-bags that are kept under the *obi*” (Pierson 1938, 58).

<sup>4</sup> Example of the critical judgments: “Abe led a government that was nationalistic, hostile to many aspects of the postwar settlement, including especially the 1947 constitution, and nostalgic for the imagined glories of a Japan that for most people had faded into the past” (Stockwin and Ampiah, 2017, viii). Further, there are very different types and levels of critique surrounding Abe's leadership, ranging from tackling “the enhanced authority and domination of the prime ministerial executive in policy making” (Mulgan 2018, 100) to considering Abe as “the pentagon's man in Japan, delivering much more on longstanding demands than all of his predecessors combined” (Kingston 2019, 167).

<sup>5</sup> In the history of philosophy, there are countless interpretations of the term “dialectics” which correspond to various traditions and backgrounds. However, it is this het-

It is true that there are plenty of studies examining Japanese culture's relation to sexuality.<sup>6</sup> However, to my knowledge, there is no interpretation that relates the name *Reiwa* to sexuality. Although the relation to aesthetic considerations is obvious and ensured through both the form (poetry) and the content (nature in spring), there is no direct indications in the poem, which could involve the theme of sexuality as a source of inspiration. The suggested new interpretation will investigate the kind of relatedness between *Reiwa* and sexuality, which goes beyond the association of spring, as a temporal framework, with fertility, as a natural phenomenon addressing the dynamics of the reproduction of organisms. In order to determine the features of that relationship, one might start with a historical investigation of the main cultural achievements in the Nara period in general and the genesis of the *Reiwa* poem in particular.

### 1. The Historical Perspective: Cosmogony, Poetry, and Sexuality

The phenomenon of sexuality is deeply anchored in human mythology, as reported in various historiographical sources. The Japanese case could be considered an exception, since the aesthetical and creative functions of sexuality constitute the main pillars of the mythological narratives that establish the roots of Japanese self-consciousness. It is true that many other cultures exhibit a central place of natural phenomena in shaping their first cultural achievements, which includes conceptions of the genesis of the universe and of the emergence of humankind as well as narratives about deities and their roles and activities.<sup>7</sup> However, precisely within Japanese cosmogonic myths, sexuality plays a central role in explaining the material conceptualization of Japan as a multitude of historically united islands, which

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erogeneity of the interpretations itself which reveals the common denominator: the universality—at least in its narrow sense of transculturality—of the idea of *the unity of the opposites*—regardless whether the focus is on epistemology, ontology or logic, on static, dynamic, finite or infinite aspects of processes etc.—is shown through the plurality of manifestations in both Eastern and Western thought systems, as well as within each one of them.

<sup>6</sup> For the relations of sexuality to marriage, parenthood, ethics and laws see, for example, the different references to Japan in (Hoshii 1986). Further examples: sexuality and art, e.g. (Lloyd 2002); sexuality, ethnography and conflicts, e.g. (Alexy and Cook 2019); sexuality in a particular historical context, e.g. (Mihalopoulos 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Within a transcultural investigation, one could for example examine the functions of natural phenomena in general and sexuality in particular in the mythologies of ancient Greece as described in (Hesiod 1988).

was created in two phases: in the first, the creation of Onogoro occurred by a *symbolic* act of the spear used by the deities Izanami and Izanagi, and in the second phase the other islands are the consequence of a sexual act between Izanagi, the male deity, and Izanami, the female deity. In fact, one finds in the book of *Kojiki* 古事記, or the Records of Ancient Matters, informative and detailed descriptions about the genesis of the cosmos, the appearance of deities and the formation of the first Japanese islands, whereby the interaction between two opposite principles is the source of creative processes. These principles are expressed according to different levels of abstractions, analogously to the plurality of interpretations of yin and yang in the teachings of Taoism.<sup>8</sup> According to Chamberlain, whose translation of the *Kojiki* appeared 1882, the first indications of the two principles are formulated by the compiler Yasumaro as follows: “Now when chaos had begun to condense, but force and form were not yet manifest, and there was nought named, nought done, who could know its shape? Nevertheless Heaven and Earth first parted, and the Three Deities performed the commencement of creation; the Passive and Active Essences then developed, and the Two Spirits became the ancestors of all things” (Chamberlain 1932, 4). The two principles take a concrete form—capable of a sexual act—as it comes to the materialist creation of the land of Japan: among several others, two deities are precisely associated within a male and a female agent: the Male-Who-Invites (Izana-gi-no-kami) and the Female-Who-Invites (Izana-mi-no-kami). These two deities created the first island in a manner that could be easily interpreted as referring to the human sexual act:

Hereupon all the Heavenly Deities commanded the two Deities His Augustness the Male-Who-Invites and Herr Augustness the Female-Who-Invites, ordering them to ‘make, consolidate, and give birth to this drifting land.’ Granting to them a heavenly jeweled spear, they [thus] deigned to charge them. So the two Deities, standing upon the Floating Bridge of Heaven, pushed down the jeweled spear and stirred with it, whereupon, when they had stirred the brine till it went curdle-curdle, and drew [the spear] up, the brine that dripped down from the end of the spear was piled up and became an island. This is the Island of Onogoro (ibidem, 21-22).

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<sup>8</sup> The three perspectives of the suggested interpretation of *Reiwa* argue that the dialectical thinking, unifying the opposite, is a universal phenomenon, scientifically detectable in several human civilizations. The reference to the dialectical elements in Taoist thought, which emerged outside of Japan, as well as recalling the elements of dialectical thinking among pre-Socratic Greek philosophers (e.g. Heraclitus, Zeno of Elea), could lead to formulate the research question of detecting analogous dialectical elements among the native Japanese population, i.e. within the teachings of ancient Shintoism, as a further element to sustain the thesis of the universality of dialectics.

Within this metaphoric scene, the “spear” stands obviously for the masculine penis,<sup>9</sup> the first “brine” for the feminine vaginal liquid and the second “brine that dripped down from the end of the spear” is doubtlessly the masculine sperm.<sup>10</sup> The story of Izanagi and Izanami was also reported in the *Nihon Shoki* 日本書紀, or the Chronicles of Japan, whereby the same references to the functions of sexuality in the Japanese cosmogonic myths in general and the conversation about male and female genitals in particular are to be found.

[Izanagi] inquired the female deity, saying: ‘In thy body is there aught formed?’ She answered, and said: ‘In my body there is a place which is the source of femininity.’ The male deity said: ‘In my body again there is a place which is the source of masculinity. I wish to unite this source-place of my body to the source-place of thy body.’ Hereupon the male and female first became united as husband and wife (Aston 2011, 13).

The *Kojiki*, the Records of Ancient Matters, was compiled in 712 C.E. and the *Nihon Shoki*, the Chronicles of Japan, in 720 C.E. Generally speaking, the first writings of Japanese history begun almost one century earlier, under the reign of Empress *Suiko* 推古天皇, 592–628 C.E. Her name “may be translated as ‘conjecture of the past’ and suggests that this posthumous title was bestowed on the empress because the writing of history was considered to be an outstanding event of her reign” (Tsunoda *et al* 1964, 1). The beginning of the eighth century witnessed the event of recording Japanese creation mythology, that is denoted by an essential, worthy of being noticed, function of sexuality: far from any *ex nihilo* conception, the Japanese sexualized cosmogony associates *creation* with *birth*, and considers birth in its literal meaning, as the result of a physical relationship between the male and female.

In the same historical period, the *Man'yōshū*, which means “Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves” and from which the *Reiwa* poem originated, was compiled. In fact, it is within this Nara period, that the written forms of Japanese poetry, *waka* 和歌, was fixed, enabling the establishment of a creative movement of literature and artistic activities. Among these creative activi-

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<sup>9</sup> In the comments to the *Nihongi*, one finds the following interpretation: “Hirata conjectures that the jewel-spear (*nu-boko* or *tama-boko*) of Heaven was in form like a *wo-bashira*. *Wo-bashira* means literally male-pillar [...]. That by *wo-bashira* Hirata means a phallus is clear” (Aston 2011, 11).

<sup>10</sup> The story goes on with the birth of children and the creation of further islands, whereby several symbolic elements are mentioned, such as the following explanation: “[the children] were not good because the woman spoke first” (*ibidem*, 24).

ties, poetry enjoyed a particular blossom. In the *Reiwa* poem itself, there is explicit indications of the historical circumstances surrounding the elaboration of the text. The poem could have been written by *Ōtomo no Tabito* 大伴 旅人, 665–731 C.E., who was hosting a gathering in his garden in the beginning of the year 730 C.E., but it is also possible that the introduction was written by *Yamanoue no Okura* 山上憶良, 660–733 C.E. (cf. Pierson 1938, 23).<sup>11</sup> The common historical context of *Man'yōshū*, *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* (entailing elements of romantic poetry and sexualized cosmogony) could be sustained through various justifications, which are related to the central function of nature and natural phenomena in the history of Japanese thought. This central function of nature is not only a permanent attribute of Japanese culture since its origins, one could also assert that “the traditional Japanese love of nature is based upon the conceived identity between man and nature and this conception of nature forms an important basis for their aesthetic appreciation of nature” (Saito 1985, 240). In the *waka*-poetry, natural phenomena play a central role in the creation and conservation of cultural coherence and identity, whereby there are, among scholars, controversial assessments of the priority of “season” or “landscape” as the core of the poetic conception of “nature” (cf. Wittkamp 2014, 42).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the genealogical records reporting “the creation of the imperial line gods representing the Sun, Mountains and the Sea each made an important contribution” (cf. Tsunoda *et al.* 1964, 12). Thus, the common historical context refers to a common spirit of cultural achievements, whereby the awareness of the necessity of harmonizing human experience with nature emerges as the result of complex interactions among various belief systems.<sup>13</sup> The historical perspective of the interpretation of *Reiwa* combines the theme of sexuality, strongly present in the writings of the Nara period, with florescence of nature oriented poetry. The aesthetical dimension of litera-

<sup>11</sup> The introduction to the poem begins with the following phrase: “(1) On the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the first month of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of Tempyō (730), there was a gathering at the house of the old man, the chief, who had prepared a banquet.”

<sup>12</sup> “Erschöpft sich die Natur in der Waka-Dichtung letztendlich nicht in der Frage der ‘Jahreszeiten’?, fragt er [Mori Asao]. [...] Somit nimmt die zentrale Rolle der Landschaft innerhalb der Waka-Dichtung deutliche Konturen an, und auch die Relevanz für die Erzeugung und Aufrechterhaltung von kultureller Kohärenz und Identität zeichnet sich ab. Die vorliegende Arbeit geht wie die genannten Forscher von der großen Bedeutung der Jahreszeitendichtung aus, ersetzt Moris ‘Natur’ jedoch durch den Begriff der Landschaft.”

<sup>13</sup> It should be mentioned that the roles of elements from Buddhism and Confucianism have also to be considered. This must occur as a supplement to the analysis of the dialectical relations between Shintoism and Taoism (see section 2). Hence, the complete analysis refers to a matrix of four interdependent subsystems.

ture gains a naturalistic foundation and enables a romantic and intellectual functionality of sexuality, which goes beyond the materiality of its reproductive and creative functions. As a short, precise but intensively expressive form, the Japanese era name, *nengō* 年号, carries this poetic spirit across the centuries, which summarizes various historical, cultural, social, and aesthetic elements. The Japanese semiotics is in this sense a permanent source of fascination and inspiration for locals and foreigners alike, because of a series of attributes that combine simplicity of forms and depth of meanings in a single beautiful unity, which has been developing through various epochs of Japanese History. As far as poetry itself is concerned, the *haiku* 俳句, the very short form in three phrases, impressed for instance the French philosopher Roland Barthes, who once wrote in a work dedicated to Japan: “Or even the haiku: how many haiku are there in the history of Japan? They are all telling the same things: the season, the vegetation, the sea, the village, the silhouette, and though every haiku is in its manner an irreducible event” (Barthes 2014, 136).<sup>14</sup>

## 2. The Systematic Perspective: Sexuality, Aesthetics, and Symbolism

The analysis of the constitutive function of the aesthetics of sexuality in forging a complex interpretation of *Reiwa* exceeds the historical and mythological foundations to tackle the systematic aspects of a new conception of sexuality-based harmony. At this stage of the analysis, one might conceive two notions of sexuality: (i) the first, inspired by Shintoism, stresses the naturalist, biological and concrete characters of sexuality, and hence associates the phenomenon with the necessity of reproduction and relates it to specific Japanese challenges such as the demographical problem or the issues of national identity. (ii) The second, which could be connected to Taoism,<sup>15</sup> considers the spiritualist, cognitive and universalist aspects of sexuality as

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<sup>14</sup> Own translation. For further assessments of haiku by Barthes, see also the pages 93-98.

<sup>15</sup> “Daoism’s positive view is that humans and nature are united in a larger whole, the primordial *Dao*, from which everything originates and which courses through everything. Human knowledge, at its best, transcends the limits of percepts and concepts and intuits the *Dao* directly. It is direct and immediate, not being dependent upon a false duality between the knowing subject and the known object” (Koller 2018, 267). Analogously, if—for instance—the duality of sexually acting humans and their sexual acts is deemed to be false, one is facing a particular conception of sexuality, which aims at transcending the perceived and conceptualized differences and oppositions.

a humanist unifying factor of heterogeneous agents, opposite principles or even antagonist civilizational elements within and beyond the Asian context. Having this distinction as a starting point, one could examine various parts of *Reiwa* poem in the light of the two cultural systems of Shintoism and Taoism and attempt to extract selected symbolic functions of sexuality, which might help with a reconsideration of the consistency of predefined paradigms of interpretative performance.

(i) There could be several associations of the details evoked in the *Reiwa* poem with elements from the Shinto tradition. For instance, the mirror evoked in the poem recalls the Sacred Mirror of the Ise Shrine, which was removed from the Imperial Palace by the legendary 10. *Tennō*, Emperor *Sujin* 崇神天皇. “It is the same Mirror which prompted the Emperor Meiji’s poem urging the people to look upon it as an inspiration to develop their own minds” (Mason 2002, 162). In an analogous manner, the mirror of the *Reiwa* poem, reflecting the beauty of a lovely girl, invites the Japanese young men and women to reflect about the fruitfulness of their physical and mental potentialities. The worldwide known natural beauty of the plum blossom is perfectly equivalent to the famous harmonious beauty of Japanese women, in both the material and immaterial senses. If the beauty of landscape could be compared to the beauty of human beings—as both are parts of nature—and without reducing the uniqueness of Japan to either its men or its women, one could detect an analogy between the physical beauty and the symbolic effect of flowers on the one hand, and the physical and spiritual attractiveness of women on the other. Although some foreign perceptions reduce Japan either to masculinity or to femininity, the mutual admiration of men and women for each other could be positively interpreted, as the respectful recognition of their particular properties (e.g. politeness, elegance etc.). In this sense, one could avoid the negative readings of particular statements, which seem to express a chauvinistic and colonizing attitude towards Japan, such as the claim that “[i]t is well established that foreign men find young Japanese women sexually attractive. It goes without saying that this attraction is physical and cultural, with both factors playing a very important role” (De Monte 2006, 83). As far as the metaphor of the mirror is concerned, and although it has a tremendous philosophical potential for far reaching interpretations,<sup>16</sup> one could content oneself with the aesthetical approach to the issue of a self-determination of a harmonious Japanese identity.

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<sup>16</sup> The philosophical use of the mirror metaphor stretches along a large spectrum from Narcissus to Plato (e.g. *Phaedrus* 255d) to Richard Rorty’s *Mirror of Nature*. It recalls also

By consulting the general attitude towards Shinto in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>17</sup> one notices a particular trend of the potentiality of misinterpreting Shintoism in extremist directions. This trend lies in the passage from admitting uniqueness to flirting with chauvinism. It is true that “Shinto has given to Japan the consciousness of self-reliance and confidence in action, and has stimulated the Japanese mentality to interest itself in every aspect of life, for all existence, to Shinto, is divine spirit” (Mason 2002, 17). Yet this function of Shintoism should be differentiated in light of its historical applicability. The distinction between State or Shrine Shinto (the official interpretation), *au contraire* Sectarian Shinto (the popular interpretation) (cf. Holtom 1963, 28) should not be neglected. Although Shintoism is considered to be among the earliest belief systems of the native population, it is not evident enough to speak about a pure local Shintoism, which can only exist as the core of Japanese exceptionalism. “Primitive Shinto embraced cults of exceedingly diverse origins, including animism, shamanism, fertility cults, and the worship of nature, ancestors, and heroes. In the course of time the distinctions between these various cults tended to disappear” (Tsunoda *et al.* 1964, 22). The heterogeneous and pluralistic nature of Shinto, which is in a harmonious accord with polytheism, does not refute the thesis of considering sexuality as a common basis for the different constituents of the Shintoist system. In fact, living in a close relation to nature and the search for a creative continuity within the natural environment speak for such a central function of sexuality. One could even formulate a sexuality-based interpretation of Shintoism: “Since constant re-creation is essential to have an ongoing world, fertility—the ability to reproduce—was therefore the heart of Shintoism. In simplistic terms, Shintoism was sex worship, cloaked, of course, in the guise of crop festivals and ancestor worship” (De Mente 2006, 20).<sup>18</sup>

(ii) A Taoist-based interpretation of sexuality is also plausible. The interpretation of basic ideas of Taoism as unity of opposite principles can take different shapes according to the specificities of the contexts and the implementation areas. The field of sexuality, as unity of masculine and feminine principles,<sup>19</sup> was permanently present in the Taoist tradition, from its ori-

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the realist correspondence theory of truth and the works of Hans Heinz Holz on the reflection theory (Widerspiegelungstheorie). An extreme interpretation may even lead to the realist school in international relations.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Chapter 13 (Shinto and Imperial Japan) in (Hardacre 2017, 403-440).

<sup>18</sup> See also (Ploton 2010, 72): “In Shintoism, it is death and not sexual pleasure which is a taboo, a source of fear and an issue to be conjured” (own translation).

<sup>19</sup> This definition could be also valid in cases of non-heterosexual contexts if one assumes a certain constructability of gender roles and identities, so that binary models could construct representations of femininity and masculinity.

gins among East Asian ancient civilizations, to the present days in contemporary China, Korea, and Japan. As Senda Minoru observed, several actual festivals in Japan have their roots in Taoism and show the strength of Taoist influence (cf. Senda 1996, 155).<sup>20</sup> Within these celebrations, the Taoist roots of some references to sexuality could be detected, too. “Tanabata, the Star Festival, which takes place on July 7, is based on a legend involving two lovers—Vega, the Weaver Maid, and Altair, the Cowherd—who are allowed to meet across the Milky Way only once a year. The lovers are slightly modified versions of the Taoist hermits Xi Wanmu and Dong Wanfu” (Senda 1996, 155-156). This last example could also recall the legend of Izanagi and Izanami, as far as a certain cosmological dimension of love might be concerned, and hence establish a common foundation of a dialectics-based understanding of sexuality, inspired by both Japanese and Chinese sources. Nonetheless, the similarities, based upon the transculturality of dialectical thinking, should not underestimate the reality of existing differences. While the very comparable traditional medical techniques or the similar types of martial arts in Japan, Korea, and China are manifestation of a harmonious common civilization, there still is—and should be—a wide range of specific local or transregional applications. Within this context, sexuality offers an effective framework for investigating the influence of Taoist thought beyond the borders of single national states. Indeed, “some of the followers of the way of Daoism developed a new school of Daoistic thought that incorporated a very strong sexual element. They surmised that in order for human beings, and again especially men, to stay in harmony with the cosmos it was necessary to expel on a daily basis all of the sexual energy that accumulates in the body” (De Mente 2006, 23). Further, there is an expansion of Taoist-based methods and practices in relation with the human knowledge of sexual energy.<sup>21</sup> The focus on such research disciplines in relation to the Japanese context may lead to revolutionary innovative interpretation by avoiding the one-sidedness of prejudices, so that one could approve the assertion of Senda, who declares that “[e]ven the extent to which Shintō is purely Japanese is coming into question. Scholars are now finding Taoist elements

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<sup>20</sup> This is the case of the placement of *kagami mochi* (“mirror-shaped rice cakes”) on the household altar on New Year’s Day, or a “month later, on February 3, Setsubun, when people scatter roasted soybeans inside and outside their homes to drive demons out and invite good luck in for the coming year.” There is also the Boy’s Festival on May 5, a day which marks—according to the lunar calendar—“the yearly shift from *yang*, the positive principle governing the universe, to *yin*, the negative counterpart.”

<sup>21</sup> Several illustrations of the sexological potentiality of Taoism are presented in (Turilin 2007).

mixed with the indigenous animist beliefs and practices. It may become possible to confirm Taoism as the most fundamental base of Japanese culture" (Senda 1996, 151). In order to sustain this position, Senda enumerates various examples within Japanese culture, ranging from "the idea of a living god" and the related imperial rituals and narratives to the "contemporary festivals" and their folkloric practices, and shows their origins and counterparts in the Taoist tradition. He concludes that "a variety of institutions, beliefs, and practices once thought to represent the purely indigenous character of the Japanese and their culture, [...], are in fact derived from Chinese Taoism" (ibidem, 156).

### 3. The Dialectical Perspective: *Reiwa* as Vital Creativity

The third perspective in the interpretation process of *Reiwa* is a unifying perspective, which attempts to harmonize the historical and systematic aspects of the functions of sexuality as a dialectical phenomenon. The unification takes into account the interplay of opposite views and antagonist positions in order to achieve new prospects for a harmonious common future, not only for Asian peoples (Japan, China and—why not?—a unified Korea) but also for all of humanity.<sup>22</sup> This occurs by overbalancing the prevailing interpretations in favor of creative conceptions stressing a transnational dimension. Even though the current understanding of classical terms entails both specific and general contents, one has to conserve the progressive elements while paying attention to the risks of reactionary interpretations. The word *wa* in *Reiwa*, which signifies harmony has been often interpreted in a manner that primarily underlines specific sides and neglects the universal potentiality of generalizing its meaning. "The character for *wa* is used to identify something as Japanese, for example the 'wa' in 'washoku,' or Japa-

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<sup>22</sup> The suggested dialectical interpretation of *Reiwa* combines various historical and systematic elements and refers not only to the beautiful harmony of an isolated Japanese society: it takes into account the interdependencies of interiority and exteriority and hence extend the harmonious togetherness to the immediate neighborhood and to the entire globe. This extension of the philosophical perspective concerns not only the space, but also the time. The idea of a beautiful and harmonious future, as it could be inspired by the dialectical interpretation of *Reiwa*, should be related to the philosophical spirit of the *Aufklärung*, in the sense of *sapere aude!*, whereby the courage of addressing taboos is the first step toward positive change. In the *Reiwa* poem, there is a line formulating a crucial philosophical question: "(9) Between old times and present times, what difference is there?" (Pierson 1938, 58). One could analogously ask: Between present and future times, what difference is there?

nese food. It also connotes harmonious relationships with mutual respect or an equilibrium consisting of diverse elements. The word thus sums up the Japanese character. This word appears at the beginning of Japan's first legal code from some 1400 years ago, *Jūshichijō-kenpō*, which reads *Harmony is of utmost value*, meaning that it is most important that people should get along with each other harmoniously. Such acceptance of plurality and peaceful coexistence has forged Japan's unique cultural outlook" (Seino *et al.* 2014, 163). Although one would not deny that each culture manifests specific characteristics, which develop within the common history, social and economic life of its members, the philosophical concepts used to designate those kinds of specificities remain universal entities. This is the case of the multiform existence of transcultural conceptions: although terms like togetherness, creativity, intelligence, independence, dignity and of course, beauty and harmony could be differently understood according to different circumstances and backgrounds, the common denominator remains their status as human factors enabling various types of communication. In other words, it is true that there are different forms of values according to the concreteness of the cultural contexts, but the very existence of values and the plurality of that existence could be also considered as a universal value.

Hence, the elaboration of a dialectical perspective for a new interpretation of *Reiwa*, inspired by the concrete universality of the phenomenon of sexuality, should start with maintaining the uniqueness of the Japanese culture while refuting the racial superiority of Japan. By doing so, the value of justice is sovereignly introduced, since this requirement applies to all countries and all cultural spheres. Within the suggested dialectical interpretation of *Reiwa*, the attempt to create a beautiful harmony between Shintoism and Taoism (and even with Buddhism and Confucianism) starts with warning against the chauvinistic interpretations of Shinto, whereby it is firstly linked to national identity, then it becomes a new form of State Shinto, as within Japanese imperialism of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The danger consists in a particular understanding of the Japanese exceptionalism, which could be instrumentalized to ground a negative effect of the idea of *Reiwa*. In fact, several interpretations were previously formulated within this conflict-oriented direction. For example, "Shinto has been defined as a racial psychology that has persisted throughout the vicissitudes of the entire national story. Japan has produced a superior and enduring culture because of the contribution of a special type of 'Japanese man'—a man furnished with a genius for acculturation, yet peculiarly endowed with the power of remaining 'forever Japanese'" (Holtom 1963, 198). There is also the reference to the

risk of sexism, since one notices that the discourse is addressed to men not women. The symbolic dimension of the hitherto practiced sexuality within patriarchal societies emphasizes this association of men with active attitudes and women with passivity and receptivity. In order to overcome one-sided views and reactionary clichés, it is necessary to rethink the genealogies, the structures and the features of several prevailing mechanistic associations, such as that between sexuality and warfare. “Along with the male’s greater aggression in other fields goes his aggression in the sphere of sexuality: males initiate sexual contact, and take the symbolically, if not actually, aggressive step of vaginal penetration [...]. Women are psychologically, no less than anatomically, incapable of rape” (Oakley 2015, 77-78). All these facets of the negative interpretation—including the allusions to militarism and authoritarianism through the association of *rei* with *meirei* 命令, i.e. command or order—could be neutralized by a creative interpretation of Shintoism and its organic relationship to Taoism, whereby many prejudices about patriarchal and matriarchal conceptions could be critically reconsidered.

## Conclusion

According to the spirit of the dialectical perspective, the sexuality-based interpretation of *Reiwa* means also a *Reiwa*-based interpretation of sexuality. Thinking dialectically about the different possible meanings of a beautiful harmony suggests an infinite program of examination of all possible connections between opposing elements, such as inner and outer perspectives, theory and practice or national and international oriented *Weltanschauung*. As far as sexuality is concerned, the crucial human phenomenon is conceived as a unity of material and immaterial elements, a philosophical harmony of matter and form. The soulful, aesthetically inspiring making love is at the same time the materialist foundation of biological and social life. *Reiwa*, as dialectical and beautiful harmony also refers to the function of feminist struggle for an equal and prosperous society, resting upon a critique of the historical shift from matriarchal to patriarchal structures.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the passage from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> century corresponds not only to the establishment and the organization of the *Tennō*-system as a bureaucracy but also to the shift from the old conception of feminine power, with its functions of protection and conflict-solving, to the insignificance of women’s roles

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<sup>23</sup> For a harmonious analysis combining historical and systematical perspectives of the feminist cause in Japan, see for example (Grössmann 1991).

(cf. Okano 1991, 39). By relating the interpretations of *Reiwa* to sexuality, the new Japanese era creates unprecedented opportunities to further emancipate Japanese women<sup>24</sup> and allow them to participate—as completely equal citizens—in the development of modern Japan. The historically exceptional status of the Japanese woman in the old times of sexual freedom and harmony should be the inspiration for a big change, which exceeds the national context. In this sense, “[i]t is time for Japanese scholarship to interest itself in the creative impetus of Japan’s own culture. [...]. The advantageous elements in [the] foreign cultures should not be abandoned; but Japan must seek fundamental inspiration for her future progressive development by original creative analysis of her cultural evolution and by self-conscious comprehension of its vital power” (Mason 2002, 169). This commandment is doubtless compatible with the endeavors towards international solidarity.

Accordingly, *Reiwa*, the creative and beautiful harmony, is the expression of the highly significant role of dialectical thinking in times of globalized troubles and recurrent systemic crises. The value of sexuality, as an implicit foundation of this concept of peaceful and productive harmony, is again emphasized by the union of the aesthetical and political dimensions of its very choice. The political functions of the appeal to sexuality are addressing the interpretation of *Reiwa* as a vital creative power in both the biological sense, which is essential for the healthy reproduction of a population, as well as the ideological sense of producing innovative solutions to economic, ecological, and geopolitical problems. Both senses are relevant while discussing a wide range of contemporary issues (anti-natalism, nihilism, the meaning of life, the future of democracy and capitalism etc.). The aesthetical functions of the use of sexuality are insofar equally present as the value of justice is enhanced permanently at all possible individual and collective levels. It is also vitalized through the actualization of an open cultural spirit, combining the elegance of art with the effectiveness of science. The beauty of the philosophy of *Reiwa*—and the philosophy of the beauty of *Reiwa* as well—is thus a consolidation of the humanist responsible attitude towards the challenges of a complex common future.

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<sup>24</sup> The *sine qua non* condition for the realization of a beautiful-harmonious society is that all individuals experience an authentic emancipation of free and equal citizen. Although the situation of Japanese women is much better than the situation of women in many other countries, there still be several fronts within the feminist struggle in Japan, e.g. equal pay for equal work, a struggle that can only be explicitly supported by the emancipatory spirit of the suggested dialectical interpretation of *Reiwa*.

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