

Kanji of the year reflects disasters that battered Japan in 2018

THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

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Seihan Mori, chief priest of Kyoto's Kiyomizudera temple, paints a giant version of the kanji of the year, "wazawai," which means disaster, at the temple on Dec. 12. (Yoshiko Sato)

KYOTO--Deadly earthquakes, typhoons and a record heat wave that wreaked havoc across Japan prompted the public to vote for "wazawai," meaning disaster, as the kanji that best captures their sentiments about the year now passing.

The kanji of the year was announced Dec. 12 by the Japan Kanji Aptitude Testing Foundation.

The organization received 193,214 entries, of which 20,858, the largest number, were for wazawai. The character is also pronounced as "sai."

It wasn't only natural disasters that caught people's attention.

Many cited "man-made disasters"--scandals such as massive thefts of cryptocurrency, power harassment in the sports world, Finance Ministry bureaucrats tampering with official documents in a political scandal and the rigging of entrance exam scores that discriminated against female applicants at medical universities.

Seihan Mori, chief priest of the famed Kiyomizudera temple here, ceremoniously drew a large sheet of traditional "washi" paper with a calligraphy brush to write the character in the annual year-end ritual at the temple in the city's Higashiyama Ward.

It was the second time that wazawai was selected as the kanji of the year after 2004, when the Niigata Chuetsu Earthquake rocked Niigata Prefecture, causing the deaths of dozens of people.

The practice of choosing a kanji of the year started in 1995, when the character for "shin," meaning earthquake, was selected after the hugely destructive Great Hanshin Earthquake in January.

This year's kanji is the 24th Chinese character to receive the designation and the last during the Heisei Era, which will end next year when Emperor Akihito abdicates in favor of his eldest son, Crown Prince Naruhito.

Last year, the kanji "kita" was selected, which means north, reflecting concerns about North Korea and its intentions.

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